

Co 9828

DISCUSSION BOOKS

General Editors :

Richard Wilson, D.Litt., and A. J. J. Ratcliff, M.A.



RUDE MECHANICALS

No. 8

RUDE MECHANICALS

A SHORT REVIEW OF
VILLAGE DRAMA

by

NORA RATCLIFF, M.A.



THOMAS NELSON AND SONS LTD
LONDON EDINBURGH PARIS MELBOURNE
TORONTO AND NEW YORK

First published in this series, September 1938

CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
I. THE DAWN	9
II. REVIVAL	14
III. THE ACTORS	23
IV. LEARNING TO ACT	40
V. WHAT LANGUAGE ?	50
VI. WHICH PLAYS ?	62
VII. PLAY-MAKING	78
VIII. STAGING	86
IX. RELIGIOUS PLAYS	97
X. RELIGION AND HUMOUR.	111
XI. CENSORSHIP	119
XII. FINANCE	131
XIII. DRAMA FESTIVALS	140
XIV. WHAT NOW ?	154
APPENDIX	161

PREFACE

IF we offend, it is with the most sincere good will. The date is long past for indiscriminate praise of the thing we love ; the true friend is the one who does not hesitate to warn and criticize. We hope that there will be much here to provoke discussion ; there is certainly much that ought to excite contradiction. There is no surer method of increasing one's faith than to be called upon to defend it.

But this book has not been prompted only by the impish delight of turning devil's advocate. Nor is it intended only as a theoretical survey. Inevitable digressions have been made into discussions of everyday difficulties and suggestions for meeting them. It is hoped that here the practical workers in the village theatre will find something to interest them.

No one who has met and talked with the workers in the village theatre movement can fail to admire their sincerity, efficiency, and singleness of purpose. Were it not that the onlooker sees most of the game it would be an impertinence for a comparative new-comer to hazard comment and criticism. And had the intention of this book been that of an inside history of the movement, the present writer would never have presumed to undertake the task when there are so many people who could speak with much greater authority.

As it is, I feel that the main purpose of this foreword should be to thank Miss Mary Kelly, and many other

PREFACE

well-known and little-known village producers, for much help, both direct and indirect, in putting this short review together. The sources of information are scattered, but thanks are also due to the contributors and editors of *Drama* (official organ of the British Drama League), and of *The Amateur Theatre and Playwrights' Journal*. Much of my material and many provocative ideas have been gleaned from the pages of these magazines.

N. R.

RUDE MECHANICALS

CHAPTER I

THE DAWN

A SPRING sunrise strikes over blue Greek hills into the island valley. Shepherds and their womenfolk are already up ; the pipes are tuning-in with a high-pitched erratic snickering, like birds disturbed by the dawn. " Dionysus " with his rout of worshippers and satyrs in attendance is waiting, ready-clad in goatskin and vine leaves, to lead his rabble in the daylong procession that is to invite fertility to crops and herds, and prosperity and healthy continuance to the people of the island.

Icaria is luckier than most villages on such days as this. That fellow Thespis, who for the last two or three years has been chosen to organize the festival, is full of bright ideas. He's begun training his " satyrs " beforehand, and, last year, in between their songs, he put on masks, first one and then another, pretending to be 'someone different each time, as he chanted the adventures of the god. And when he was Dionysus, you would have sworn it was the god himself speaking. He even made you believe in the satyrs too, the way he had trained them to dance and skip and chant their songs. They seemed no longer to be men you worked with, side by side, in the fields and vineyards.

RUDE MECHANICALS

A strange tug it gave you, right down inside yourself somewhere, to stand there and feel that you were watching the god Dionysus himself reliving his adventures in word, gesture, and movement. Something of a wizard this Thespis must be, surely. Old Cleon thinks it isn't right. He says that the gods will be angry at a mortal setting himself up as one of them like that. And Thespis must be a terrible liar, he says, pretending that all these things happened to himself, when they didn't really. It's deceitful, that's what it is, says Cleon (Solon of Athens will say the same thing too, a few years later). Cleon doesn't know what the village is coming to, but young folk nowadays have no sense of religion. . . . But here they come ; and two white bullocks are drawing Thespis in his wagon—no, not Thespis, it's the god himself. . . . I know now where that queer feeling comes from. It's because the god has somehow got inside Thespis and made him different. It's the breath of the god breathed into Thespis !

Time marches on ! And nearly two thousand years later the townsfolk of York are up with the June sunrise on Corpus Christi morning. The crowd begins to thicken and stagnate at certain chosen spots—in front of the Mayor's house is one of the best places. Soon the slow procession of "pageants" will start. Each of these wagons with its two-storeyed fit-up stage will pause here in turn, and the actors will present their appointed episode in the story of Man's Creation, Fall, and Redemption.

The Armourers, since they can supply fine armour and a flaming sword for Gabriel, are responsible for THE EXPULSION FROM EDEN ; the Bakers, who can also come handily by the necessary stage props, are to give THE LAST SUPPER ; the Barbers have in hand CHRIST'S

THE DAWN

BAPTISM. We shall listen devoutly, awed by the solemn story, for it affects each one of us personally, this graphic reassurance that, in spite of Man's unworthiness, our safety in the next world is assured, if we will but believe. So real is this to us, so much a part of the rough and tumble of our day to day life, that the sight of the gilded, bearded God is as comforting as that of a living father. And the broad jests, the slap-stick farce, served up as piquant sauce to the solemn story, will not jar or hurt us. We are blissfully free from the squeamish shrinking from actuality that will possess our descendants in a few hundred years' time ; an embarrassment in the face of truth, that will stalk abroad disguised as "good taste." Here we have, moving and speaking before us, the very stuff of this world and our hopes and fears for the next. And five hundred years hence, scholars, grubbing amongst our torn and yellow prompt books, will tell us that we have assisted at the "birth of British Drama." And careful editors of texts will score out the "belly-laughs" or herd them discreetly into the small print of a footnote.

We recognize the faces of our friends and fellow-workmen. Thomas will earn threepence for that realistic imitation of a crowing cock—he was practising it the other day as we sat side by side on a bench feathering arrows. . . . And in some queer way that we don't quite understand, but we do know that there's a great thrill about it, we see our brother John, not John any longer, but Peter the Apostle, who first betrays his Christ, and then suffers an agony of repentance for what he has done. And that sneaking fellow who lives in the next street to ours—we've never liked the look of him—he's playing Judas. He's just gone out to hang himself . . . good riddance ! And here is our dear Lord

RUDE MECHANICALS

Himself, new-risen from the dead, greeting the Women on Easter morning . . . my wife is on her knees . . . et resurrexit tertia die, secundum scripturas . . .

Another flash-back. In the autumn of 1652, certain "countreymen, most of them, for anything I can heare, all of Stanton Harcourt parish, began to learn an old play of Mucedorus and Amadine. They played it privately every week (rehearsals ?) and later in a more publike manner about Christmas . . . in Stanton Harcourt and in neighbouring parishes." On February 3, 1653, they gave a performance at Witney. Here the harsh fate that dogs the steps of amateurs was awaiting them. But instead of an accident to the curtain or an untoward collapse of the scenery, much worse befell them, or rather, their audience, for the floor of the hall gave way and many spectators were killed.*

And the love of theatre did not die in the English villages. Time again marches on, and now, into the friendly glow of lamps, candles, and firelight, into the warmth of the hospitable and crowded farm kitchen, a crowd of Christmas Mummers prances. First, Father Christmas, with his broom to clear the way ; St. George and the Turkish Knight ; Sabra, the King of Egypt's daughter . . . all with masks and fluttering ribbons ; Beelzebub and his frying-pan (you'll soon need to get your pennies ready). The Clown is shouting out his nonsense—why does he bother to wear a mask ? We'd all know old Sam's voice anywhere. You can hear him a mile off when he's calling up his beasts. And now they've collected their pennies, drunk their ale, and are off again into the frosty night.

And to-night, as we find our way to a vacant chair—

* Quoted by E. K. Chambers, *The English Folk Play*, p. 190.

THE DAWN

wooden, very hard, and wedged tightly in amongst the others—we are perhaps aware of a cloud of ghostly witnesses who need no chairs : Greek shepherds, mediæval craftsmen, hilarious Christmas Mummers and Yorkshire sword-dancers. . . . They, like us, are waiting to see what this new thing called The Village Drama Movement is about to give to us. And, perhaps, if our ears are keen enough and our senses sufficiently alert, we shall know whether they are approving, whether they recognize it as true offspring of their own spontaneous expression of joy, of faith in life and in humanity's future ; or whether, like that other immortal, Puck, they will jeer and play tricks upon this "crew of patches, rude mechanicals" who "met together to rehearse a play."

CHAPTER II

REVIVAL

“ All for your delight we are not here ”

I

WHETHER we like it or not, we live in an age of centralization and control. The most spontaneous of nature's expressions are regimented, improved upon, exploited. The lives of poultry are shortened, their flesh toughened, by ingenious methods devised to foster the overproduction of eggs. Cows stand patiently waiting the milker's hand, unaware of the grim-looking ledgers standing equally ready to record their yield, and of the intricate workings of the Milk Marketing Board which makes them units in the country's milk supply. One fears that the day is not far distant when, instead of the comforting cry, “Coo oop!” which brings the cows in from the fields to milking, followed by the peppery and lurid badinage of the cow hand as he drives in the recalcitrant, we shall hear the grim call of a mechanical hooter, and the regimented beasts will line up in inspector-graded order and trot briskly to their stalls. To-day we are such stuff as Blue Books are made of, and our little lives are rounded by Committees, Commissions, and the

REVIVAL

Means Test Man or the Income Tax Collector, according to our station.

Is it likely, then, in such an age, that our pleasures and pastimes should escape this craze for organization? Sport has become professionalized. Men pay money and stand shivering to watch others over-exert themselves. Grouse shot on the morning of the 12th, on Lord ——'s estate in Scotland, are bundled into aeroplanes so that guests in a London hotel may enjoy the fruits of the "sport" in which they had no share. And a group of innocent villagers, who decide it would be good fun to act a play, find that all unwittingly they have become part of something known as THE VILLAGE DRAMA MOVEMENT and have brought upon themselves the kindly limelight of Adult Education Committees.

Then they, too, catch this organizing fever; they fill in forms, pay subscriptions, attend conferences, or solemnly appoint delegates to do so. And we all take ourselves very seriously and discuss the relative merits of five or fifteen marks for "dramatic endeavour" with all the solemnity (and as little unanimity) of a Cabinet meeting reviewing the nation's foreign policy. Where, oh where, is our boasted British *laissez-faire* and sense of humour? And yet, so strange is this age of ours, so small a hope of survival is there for anything that is not buttressed by national organization and committee-control, that a large percentage of the thriving groups of village amateurs do owe their existence and continuance to the fostering and care of a central body, the Village Drama Society, now incorporated in the British Drama League.

It is worth while taking some note of how this central organizing body came into being.* It is significant that the lead in this conscious revival of drama in the village came from a group of people who were anxious to act religious plays. "It may well be," suggests Dr. Bottomley, "that we can see there a decisive effort on the part of rural England to undo the results of the long neglect that followed the Reformation and was intensified by the Industrial Revolution."

To give the story in Miss Kelly's own words. "My sisters and I had, for twenty years, produced plays with the children of this very small village, and one of the regular seasons for play-production was May" (delighted nods from those ghosts of Greek shepherds), "when we combined it with a kind of May Festival, held on Ascension Day." (And now the mediæval craftsmen smile approval.) It was during the war that the grown-ups were persuaded to try their hand. Miss Kelly wrote a play for them "on the Communion of Saints, in which a convenient vision showed a great number of saints of past times, who appeared, took a characteristic pose, and disappeared; a large cast was therefore roped in, but hardly anybody had any real acting to do. One of the farmers' wives who had taken part spoke strongly to me at the end, and said it must not be the end, it must be the beginning." This anonymous

* For most of the material of this short history of the Village Drama Society I am indebted to Dr. Gordon Bottomley's article in *Drama*, October, 1931, and to a letter from Miss Mary Kelly, founder and present Secretary of the Village Drama Section of the B.D.L., in which she told me the story of the Kelly Players.

REVIVAL

farmer's wife was right ; it was the beginning of one of the most live movements that have found their way into our villages.

The Kelly Players, under Miss Kelly's direction, became the spearhead of the revival in the West ; the Kelly Barn, where their plays were performed, was the Mecca for other villages that were anxious to do the same sort of thing. Miss Kelly's help was called for and given unsparingly in an ever-widening area. At first the Kelly Players confined themselves to religious drama, "Partly from their very great interest in the story of Oberammergau and partly from their feeling that they did not want comedy so soon after the war." Later, however, the Players turned their hand to comedy as well.

As a result of the growing interest, the spring of 1919 saw a small committee formed : and the good work continued. The Village Drama Society was born. At first only a West Country affair, it soon found it was not to be allowed to hide its light under a bushel. "In the end its help was sought from such diverse quarters (including Scotland) that its dimensions were clearly seen to be national, and its usefulness obviously demanded a removal to London (1923)."

The Women's Institutes, largely as a result of Miss Kelly's pioneering work among them, took up the cause of drama. "Before the war, villages in which the actual villagers were acting might be counted on one man's fingers ; within the last three years (this was written in 1931) the Village Drama Society has been in communication with ten thousand villages." Nowadays (1938), since the organization of the County Committees and the incorporation of the V.D.S. in the British Drama League (1931), it is impossible to gauge the activity of

RUDE MECHANICALS

the Village Drama Section in quite such spectacular figures. Much of the advisory work is done indirectly through the County Committees and Rural Community Councils, but its work in co-ordinating semi-independent areas and organizations, its usefulness as clearing-house for educational, social service and genuinely amateur and voluntary bodies is invaluable.

And if at times we feel apprehensive at the sight of so much intricate organization, if we find it difficult to reconcile the old, spontaneous love of play-acting with the ominous-looking buff forms and syllabuses (in triplicate) of education authorities, it is not upon that original Village Drama Society we should direct our suspicions and criticism.

A well-known critic of the amateur dramatic world let fly a shrewd shaft when as conclusion to an account of a Conference of the Village Drama Section of the B.D.L. he wrote, "It was really sad to see the Authorities on Village Drama departing for their homes. We *do* hope they get back safely to London, Hull, and the lovely lanes of Lancashire."

3

What are the characteristics of this "new" village drama, fostered as it is beneath the kindly wing of culture? How does it compare with similar forms of expression in other ages?

The outstanding feature, when it is compared with the rustic tomfoolery of the Mumming and Folk Plays is, of course, that it is conscious of itself as a "movement." The organizing of festivals, the interchange of visits between villages, the existence of a headquarters for advice

REVIVAL

on plays and loans of books and costumes, the paternal supervision and help from education authorities, are all symptoms of this self-consciousness. This new village drama is essentially a modern child, conscious of the careful pains that are being taken in its education, a sort of Montessori system for the community.

But was it not the villager Thespis himself who was first mainly responsible for the organizing of the drama festivals at Athens? Competitive festivals too. By this time, however, Thespis and his drama had become urbanized; he had also got himself mixed up with Pisis-tratus and Athenian politics. Hundreds of villages in Greece were still celebrating their seedtime and harvest, blissfully unconscious of the technical improvements that might be made in their performances.

Then what about the Gild shows, the mediæval processions of the pageants, surely these were organized? Look at the careful lists of properties and expenses sheets. Organized in one direction, yes. What we should call nowadays the province of the Business Manager and those concerned with the front of the house. These players had been banished by the mediæval dictators of culture, the Church, because their shows were rapidly becoming too "spontaneous," too much a reflection of the lay mind and not of the clerical. And acting technique—beyond the necessity of making themselves heard, and tricks of spectacle to hold the attention of their audience, such as a gaping hell-mouth or a Herod raging horribly—would be unknown to them. But technique as we know it to-day was not necessary for the job they had in hand. They were the leaders in a community's expression of the mixture of worship and riotous fun which has in all ages characterized a religious festival.

RUDE MECHANICALS

The weak spot in most modern village drama is that the "urge to act" is vague and general rather than specific. The pioneers, the Kelly Players, knew what they wanted to do. They wanted to act religious plays at the village celebrations of Ascension Day ; and so they got on with it, and got on with it so well that neighbouring villages caught the infection of their enthusiasm.

But as the influence widened, as the groups multiplied, far too many of them mistook the outward expression for the thing itself. The central driving *need* to act, to let out something that was fighting for expression, was lacking.

"The problem that presented itself first," says Dr. Bottomley in his account of the Village Drama Society, "was an unexpected one ; there was a dearth of suitable plays, a need which no one had considered." And to-day, after nearly twenty years' activity of the Village Drama Society, after all the encouragement it has given to new dramatists by the organizing of play-writing competitions and festivals in which the amateur playwright has an opportunity of trying his work out on a stage, still the cry goes up "We can't find the right plays !" And the standard of plays submitted in the annual competition has sunk so low that last year it was decided to abandon the competition altogether.*

Now obviously there is something sadly wrong with a movement that claims to be the means of giving self-expression to a community—only to discover that the community has nothing to express ! It is like spending twenty years teaching a dog to talk, only to discover that it much prefers barking. Language was born of

* The competition has now been revived, but in a new form, by which plays will be judged *in production*.

REVIVAL

man's burning need to communicate with his neighbour, not because he heard some one else speaking and thought it would be fun to do the same—that's a parrot's idea of fun, not a man's.

Bernard Shaw reminds us that if you wash a cat it will never again wash itself; "if you want to see a cat clean, you throw a bucket of mud over it, when it will immediately take extraordinary pains to lick the mud off."

When men were striving, against what forces they knew not, to wrest their livelihood from the slopes and pastures of the Greek hills, they evolved, out of their great need, a form of incantation, of riotous prayer, a cajoling of the god they had created for themselves. Whilst the Christian faith still held an everyday simple meaning for each man and woman, and when the Church frowned upon its too boisterous expression, the gilds took up the gay parade of a robust faith. In our own day—in pre-Nazi Germany, in America, and latterly in England—the need of a mud-bespattered working-class to "lick itself clean" through dramatic expression has given us a virile amateur theatre movement upon whose rapidly growing stock of plays the Tory dilettanti cast envious eyes. This sturdy little gutter-born brat of theatre breathes into his rag dolls, his bits of stick and oddments picked up from heaven knows where, and because his imagination is fired by his great need he learns to create. Meanwhile, little Lord Village Drama Fauntleroy wanders round his air-conditioned nursery, gazing with lacklustre eye on the "hygienic and educational" toys supplied by his doting parents, and plaintively wonders "what to play at."

To indulge in a sudden change of imagery: village drama is at present like a mechanically perfect Rolls

RUDE MECHANICALS

Royce, stranded with empty tank, out of the reach of petrol. Some of us believe that the petrol does exist, but it needs courage to start out on the weary tramp in search of it. It will not be the same brand of petrol as that which drives the cheerfully rattling car of the proletariat ; it may not even be the same brand as that recommended by the University garage proprietors from whom the car was bought.

A few questions, some of which we are trying to answer in this book, may guide us in this search for a "driving spirit." Why did the Women's Institutes turn to drama as a form of self-expression (apart from the fact that they were urged to do so "from above") ? Why do many village groups complain of the difficulty of attracting men into the fold ? What restrictions on choice of play are enforced by the censorship of the local Church, or other powers that be ? In how many cases is a village group the creation and whim of a local leader, rather than a spontaneous growth ? How many groups write or adapt their own plays ? How many village audiences suffer the drama as they do garden fêtes and bazaars, merely in the cause of charity ? Why are so many dialect plays and plays specifically written for the village group so hopelessly trivial ? How many groups acting in villages are merely amusing themselves and hoping to amuse their audience by ineffective apings of the professional stage ? And, finally, when we get the petrol, who's going to drive the car—the Board of Education or the villager ?

CHAPTER III

THE ACTORS

“What are they that do play it?”

I

“CAN you suggest a play we might do in our village? We have nine women and three men. I think we could find one or two extra women if necessary.” “Can you suggest a farce for about a dozen women for our Women’s Institute Festival entry? We played tragedy last year, but would like something funny for a change.” “We have a good many juveniles connected with our village group and we should like to make use of them. Can you suggest a play?” “The XX Village Players wish me to write and ask you if you would be prepared to take over their next production. We are more or less equally interested in three plays, so we leave the final choice to you. Do you consider *Strange Orchestra*, *Hay Fever*, or *Rookery Nook* as the most suitable?” The XX Village Players, mark you!

Not that we’re going to discuss choice of play yet. The above imaginary, but typical, correspondence has been invented to illustrate the varying talents of which a village group may find itself in possession. What sort

RUDE MECHANICALS

of people are able and willing to give up, at first one night each week, and during the last fine frenzy of impending public performance three, four, and five nights, to preparation and rehearsal :

Sometimes the chicken comes first, sometimes the egg. The Women's Institutes have played an energetic and important part in the revival of village drama, and in their case the egg came first. A group of women, with common interests, was gathered together in each separate village. Lecturers on all sorts of subjects were invited ; instruction and competitions arranged in cake-making, leather-work, barbola, rug-making. . . . Local histories were compiled and exhibitions held. Sooner or later the cry was sure to come, " Let's do a play ! " And from the egg of this already established community, this group of people who had already experienced the joy of working together, was hatched a new fledgling of village drama.

The need of an already established group to turn to drama as a form of their needs and ideals should offer the finest and firmest foundation for real community theatre. Here, one might argue, lies the secret of " team spirit," the English sporting euphemism for " artistic unity." And this, whether at the Moscow Art Theatre or in some obscure village schoolroom, should give the acting group the key to first-class " theatre."

The inclination of the Women's Institutes towards drama was helped and fostered, sometimes under great difficulties, by the enthusiasts and organizers of village drama in general. The Village Drama Society was quick to realize how useful these new recruits would be, and without the help of the V.D.S. many of these dramatic fledglings would have died almost at birth.

THE ACTORS

What sort of "acting talent" could these groups call on? What were the real motives driving them on to try drama? Some genuine enthusiasm there must have been, for such groups had alternative activities to which they might devote themselves, and yet many of the members preferred drama as their means of self-expression. There will be, of course, one or two born actors in the group—women capable of really good work, whether they have realized it before or not. These are the women with imagination, who seize avidly upon the opportunity of projecting themselves into fresh personalities, periods, and ideas. Perhaps, in some cases, there is a danger here; too often the "woman of imagination" digs herself into the position of petty artistic dictator, and if for what she lacks in imagination she substitutes superior social status the tyranny is complete, and sooner or later the group will stagnate. But, invaluable as leaders are, the real backbone of such village groups are the "servers and helpers," those who will tackle conscientiously any job of work that is going to contribute to the success of the venture. There is a tremendous loyalty in these less gifted artists which outweighs to a very big extent any lack of ability or technique. Many of them are women well on in middle-age, with a shrewd knowledge of life, learnt, like Romeo, "without book." And any one with a knowledge of life can, under the right direction, learn to pattern it, decorate and interpret it in "theatre"—theatre which can be readily understood by those who have sat alongside them in this same school of life. Some of the plays they choose (particularly in the early stages) may seem trivial; some of their acting (even in the later stages) may stir an urban titter. But the good actor is the one who is sufficient to his audience.

RUDE MECHANICALS

How many of us to-day could watch Henry Irving in *The Bells* without some tendency to smile—or shiver ?

During recent years there has been a change in the policy of some of the Women's Institute acting groups, encouraged by their own headquarters and the Village Drama Society, but looked upon with some suspicion by many of the individual groups. Either, like Eve, impatient to share the dangerous apple of dramatic expression, or, according to official explanation, realizing how hopelessly limited their scope is without male assistance, the more progressive groups now invite the co-operation of husbands, brothers, cousins, and even more distant male relatives in their plays.

How far is this a Good Thing ? Or how far, by attempting in this way to extend their scope, are such groups merely diluting the strength and appeal of their work ? Let us set aside, as not for discussion in this chapter, the plea that men must be admitted "because there are so few good plays for women only." At the beginning of the revival of the one-act play by amateurs, pioneers were sighing at the lack of suitable plays. But demand has created a steadily growing supply. If all-women plays are really wanted, all-women plays will be, and have been, written—many bad, some indifferent, a few good. We have already said that a source of strength to these Women's Institute groups lies in the fact that they were already united by a common interest and some sense of unity prior to turning their hands and tongues to acting. Then, surely, the best contribution they can make in the general field of drama, and the best mental and artistic exercise they can offer to themselves, is amongst these common interests and in terms of their own interpretation of life *as women* ? Why should it be piously

THE ACTORS

assumed (unfortunately, not only by men) that now these groups are becoming more ambitious and trying to do better plays, they will find it necessary to call in male help? Is a play like Rodney Ackland's *Old Ladies* a mere training school for women players, who, when they attain sufficient confidence, may hope to invite male help and launch out into an Aldwych farce? This carries the argument to absurdity, but serves well to illustrate the point that Women's Institute acting groups should beware, lest, in a laudable desire to go from strength to strength, they throw away a very precious birthright—their identity as a *women's* organization. Let them perfect their art by using all the material their excellent organization offers them. One of the axioms of art is that the artist is not cramped by his material, but delights in respecting it. A wood carving can never look like a granite sculpture. But it's a poor wood-carver who, failing to get his results, sighs peevishly, "This isn't good; but what couldn't I do with a block of granite?" Indeed, the prison unto which we doom ourselves, no prison is. The only effective argument, to my mind a very powerful one, for this invitation of men into the fold is not so much that the women need the help of the men, as that the village, in its need for community expression, begs that the women should sacrifice their individuality and identify themselves with the needs of the village as a whole. Of course this will never happen in so many words, but it's a stirring thought, this deputation of mere males—"Please, may we play, too?"

And now for our second letter; what is to be done with the youthful enthusiasts for drama? At one time the young people were catered for in the lighter side of Sunday-school life. Some of the sixteen- to twenty-year-

RUDE MECHANICALS

olds are occupied in the winter evenings in the non-field sports activities of the Cricket and Football Clubs and their fund-raising concerts. There are many boys and girls who have just left school who feel, or are made to feel, that they are still too young for the established groups of adult "Players." Where the village is large enough to retain its children up to school-leaving age their school friendships and loyalty are still strong, and they welcome any suggestion that promises to hold them together. Here is a genuine extract from a letter. "A group of my pupils, who have just left school, wish to carry on with some dramatic work in evening classes. Can you suggest suitable plays?"

But in smaller villages, fairly recent reorganization has carried off the children of eleven and upwards. Borne away by a morning bus, they return to their homes, in winter, after nightfall. It is even more important to be able to offer to these adolescents, when they leave school, some opportunity of identifying themselves with the active, and, let us hope, progressive side of the life of their native village. These young people can give a healthy leavening to the work of more adult members of an acting group. Fresh from their work at school, they are quick to learn—too often, alas, embarrassing their elders by their speed in line memorizing. Their resource, invention, and gusto can do much to keep the group alive. To the producer or trainer they often serve a useful purpose akin to that of the mediæval "whipping-boy." You can remind fourteen-year-old Jane Smith to sound her aitches, or reprimand Tommy Jones for unpunctuality or beseech him to change his pronunciation of tongue from "tong" to "tung," without hurting their feelings. Meanwhile, Mrs. B., who's rather touchy about

THE ACTORS

such things, makes her own mental notes and takes warning.

There are parts in adult plays into which these young people may be fitted. Not that one advocates an endless succession of *Midsummer Night's Dreams*, with all the infant life of the village pressed into service. But an even more dreadful prospect is the grimly "young" blonde (35, and known to be the mother of four or five healthy children) who has been playing lead for the last six or seven years and goes on coyly aping the *ingénue* on a small stage, far too intimate for make-up to hide the tracing of time's lining pencil.

Often, too, these half-and-halves between schoolchild and adult can concentrate on a programme of their own, or a one-act play as part of a grown-up programme. Their sort of fun, the type of play they would like to tackle, is different from that chosen by adults, but none the less attractive. In the world of politics stress is laid on the importance of recruiting early in order to make sure of the driving power, the enthusiasm (and, unfortunately, the too early regimented opinion) that young people can bring to a movement. The activities of the Junior Imperial League on the one hand and the Young Communist League on the other, bear witness to this. Is the cause of Intelligent Leisure to stand aside whilst youth is shared out amongst the politicians?

"But the presence of young people cramps our style," or "We mustn't be corrected in the presence of our children"—this latter exploded Victorian humbug, surely? Or, "But these youngsters limit our choice of play." Do they, really? Youngsters are going to see the plays—or what are those low forms set out for, only a yard away from the platform's edge? In any case, I'm

RUDE MECHANICALS

not suggesting that this younger end should consist of schoolchildren, but of embryo men and women, who, provided always that the dead hand of unemployment does not stunt their growth, are already being called upon to mix with an adult world, to face many of its problems and accept not a few of its responsibilities. Should they not, then, be invited to share its leisure ?

2

But what place for these young people is there in a group that invites its guest producer to choose between *Strange Orchestra* and *Rookery Nook* ? Fortunately such groups are in a minority, but they do exist. Where do the actors for such groups come from ?

Modern transport, cheap cars, cheap bus fares, even obliging expresses that stop on request at small wayside stations, are breaking down the frontier line between town and country. Given good rail and road services and building facilities, the villages that surround our big industrial centres are becoming the bedrooms and the week-end homes of the townsman. Now these townsmen, or their wives—or both—genuinely love the country or they wouldn't live there ; and many of them feel a warm and wholly commendable loyalty to the village of their adoption and its social life. So a few choice spirits get together, and, as a result of their joint desire to amuse themselves and entertain the "ordinary villager," the inevitable XX Village Players—Maskers—Mummers, or what you will, come into existence. Of course the "ordinary villagers" are invited to join in ; these urban invaders are not snobs. But more often than not the villagers are, and avoid too

THE ACTORS

intimate contact with "strangers" who have lived, perhaps, a mere ten years in the village. Moreover, they fight shy of rehearsals held in Mrs. Blank's lounge-hall.

And so this group of players usually remains isolated from the real life of the village, a sort of resident troupe of entertainers. Their shows are welcome enough, and if the group is one of genuine hard workers, who take their audience into account, the amateur theatre may be enriched by real pioneering, missionary work amongst people to whom "theatre" would otherwise mean nothing. But modern transport plays its tricks even here. The Barn Theatre or the village schoolroom is likely to become a fashionable dramatic shrine for the Players' town friends, petrol-borne pilgrims in search of "something different."

A dashing rustic flavour may be given by timing the show carefully to coincide with a full moon, and one conjures up visions of the drama-conscious shepherd striding rough-shod up fells and over moors. But a sight of the reality leaves us wondering how far that moon was really necessary to the high-powered cars whose strong head-lights swept the country roads during the nights of the show. Is there not more than a little danger that these town audiences will elbow the villagers from their seats just as the town actors make the real villager shy of taking the stage? A pre-West End try-out in a village sounds very romantic, but are the actors playing for the benefit of the London managers' agents and the press critics or for that of the unsophisticated villager? Or are we hopelessly off the track in assuming some shade of difference in the mentality of town and village? No village acting group can afford to shirk a decision on this point.

RUDE MECHANICALS

Let me give an example to illustrate this difference in audience-approach. A production of Clemence Dane's *Granite* was given by a village group. It is a play of queer undercurrents of evil ; shades of subtle characterization. How far is the Drowned Man a symbol of the devil in Judith, conjured into human shape by her loneliness and the fear-haunted island of Lundy ? How far is he a supernatural being ? How far a very clever rogue who finds a woman already driven to the verge of insanity by her life alone there with Jordan ? To the literary-minded reader or to the seasoned, sensitive playgoer the piece is one of eerie, half-brooding, harsh Celtic twilight. But let villagers play it *for* villagers and see what happens both to actors and to audience. They choose to enjoy it in quite a different fashion from that of the urban dilettante ; and they do enjoy it—thoroughly. The actors make for no subtle hints and half-lights, but for full-blooded wickedness and terror. To the sophisticated the play would seem to have deteriorated into melodrama. Shall I ever forget my own shiver of alarm when I heard, on the first night of its playing by these village amateurs—the naïve gust of excited laughter when the Man took down the gun for the second time ? But I quickly realized, in the immediate silence that greeted Judith's outburst at the door, that this had only been the safety-valve laughter of unsqueamish appreciation. On the second night an audible whisper, "Watch him go for t'gun," bore witness to the grip the players had gained over their audience. A town team (of the normal amateur type, at any rate) might have been shocked by the laughter and the whispers into fumbled playing. Not so the farmer who played the Drowned Man. To him it became the very life-breath of his playing—and,

THE ACTORS

after all, wasn't it, perhaps, something of an echo of his own harsh laughter, as he sat in his corner and watched Judith's clumsy efforts to free herself from slavery ?

I could quote more than one example, too, where a player in a comic part raised gusts of appreciative laughter by neat touches of topical and local caricature. To keep to the same play, *Granite*, the actor who played the Parson appreciated, and took care to point up, his apparently harmless remark to Penny, "I knew your grandfather, my dear" ("Penny's" grandfather being the butt of much well-meaning local humour). He knew that, do what he would with that line, the laugh was sure to come, so why not, since it didn't hurt the scene, work for the laugh and let "a good time be had by all" ? (Pause—whilst the æsthetes shiver !)

These examples have been chosen more or less at random to prove that "where the actors come from" does matter enormously. It will affect their choice of play and their conception of the play when chosen ; the style of their acting ; their sensitiveness to their unity with the audience. "Residents" in a village, however technically brilliant their performance may be, cannot hope (if they are wise will not hope) to make the same "family party" of their shows. Let me make it plain : by a "family party show" I do not mean a careless, slipshod, or inferior performance, but the presence of the something extra that holds between actor and audience and is the life-blood of village drama. If, in order to get an audience that they can play to, an audience that will appreciate the urban subtlety and finish of their style, the resident rural amateurs organize good parking for cars and work up their town publicity, the villagers who do come to the performances will in their turn

RUDE MECHANICALS

become conscious of a family party atmosphere, but of a family to which they do not belong, and in which they receive the pitying toleration reserved for the raw country cousin.

This is taking for granted that the rural amateurs (I will not call them village players) have some promptings of conscience on the type of play that should be given in a village and the characterization that villagers can appreciate. Unfortunately there are groups that are deaf and blind even to this—the *Rockery Nook* and *Private Lives* variety. I say nothing (here, at any rate) against their ability to act such plays ; if good urban amateur actors choose to live in the country, they will, of necessity, have brought their skill with them. But this is not *village* drama. The choice of plays like this shocks village morality. Perhaps that wouldn't matter so much—there are times when village moral conventions would be all the better for a healthy tonic—but it shocks it to no purpose ; shocks it into an even fiercer defence of its prejudices. At the same time, the throw-away wit, slick dialogue, and quick-fire epigrams entirely fail to amuse. The choice of such plays for such surroundings is villainous, and shows a pitiful ambition in the fool that chooses them.

3

Here is another quotation from a village producer's letter. "I have managed to get together a cast, not of every nationality, but of every denomination in the village—of every 'layer' in the village—so that where State and Church have failed, drama has succeeded." What sort of plays should we look for to suit such cross-

THE ACTORS

sections of society : There are plays (usually, I admit, well-established classics, but careful search will find modern examples) where both the sophisticated resident and the genuine villager can find parts much to their taste. And in this connection let me slip in a parenthetical word of disapproval (*pace* Shakespeare—the court entertainer) against the plays which, flattering the “top layer” by a drawing-room setting and juicy parts for the Oxford accent and the expert wearer of evening dress, introduce the socially inferior merely to ridicule them in so-called comic relief. The adenoidal maid-of-all-work and the simple-minded rustic are no more typical of the villager than are the Western Brothers of the public school man.

A play like *She Stoops to Conquer* (yes, hackneyed, I know, but not to the villagers that have seen perhaps only one or two plays in all their lives) calls for educated speech and bearing in at least four of the parts, but offers riotous opportunities to the not-so-polished. Tony Lumpkin is a gift from heaven to a fellow with a spark of the actor in him. The scene in the *Three Pigeons* acted by those who base their performances on years of actual experience (in this case take care to close rehearsals tactfully by 9.30 !) can hold up a convincing Saturday night mirror to nature.

After an earlier comment on the use of the socially inferior for purposes of comic relief, I should, to be consistent, hesitate to recommend Shakespeare, were it not for the actability and genuine truth of parts like Bottom or Grumio. For Shakespeare is a solution of this mixed cast problem. There is something particularly healthy and refreshing in working with a cast for most of whom Shakespeare has never been marred by the

RUDE MECHANICALS

shadow of examinations and context questions. The plays are tackled for their "theatre value," and the one or two sophisticated actors, to whom one may have to trust the leading parts, quickly catch a fresh fire from the work of the others.

4

Much of this discussion of where the actors come from seems to be bound up with the question of where the audience comes from. This is not accidental, but a vital point in the argument, for, in true village community drama, actors and audience must be on common ground.

Another thing that causes some misgivings, not only to theorists but to practical workers in the village theatre, is that the audience is only too well aware of where the actors come from. To many of the audience, it is not *Louka* who is in the arms of *Sergius*, but Miss X who is flirting shamelessly with Mrs. Y's husband. And eyes stray from the stage to discover how Z (Miss X's fiancé) and little Mrs. Y are taking this. And, the night that Z is known to be in the audience, Miss X tries to convey that she's really only acting, and would much rather it was Z who was trying to kiss her. Harmless-looking lines in the dialogue take upon themselves a double meaning or a topical humour (take the example from *Granite*, quoted above): sometimes this helps, at other times the results are devastating.

This, from the point of view of the audience, adds a distinct spice to the show. But it spoils the illusion, the theorists tell us, when the audience cannot forget that

THE ACTORS

it is watching its sisters, brothers, cousins—often its mothers! It raises something of the problem that always intrigued me as a child—does the clergyman's wife listen to her husband's sermons, and if so, what is the result at home afterwards?

Now I do deplore the threat to illusion that comes from screen and theatre gossip papers, where the private lives and loves of famous actors are greedily seized upon by their fans. Whilst Henry VIII. is staring with growing distaste at Anne of Cleves, it doesn't please me a bit to hear a hoarse whisper behind me, "He's married to her, really." But surely this hunger for a knowledge of an actor's real life shows how deeply rooted is this sort of dual approach to the conventions of stage and screen. If it is strongly in evidence in the case of professionals, why make a hypocritical pretence that it should, and could easily be, abolished amongst amateurs? The actors get a pleasant kick out of it. "Wasn't So-and-so good?" "And he's not a bit like that in real life, is he?" And the audience gets a sort of contrapuntal thrill superimposed on the interest of the story and characters in the play.

Admittedly the stage illusion should be the stronger interest, and it is the job of the conscientious amateur to see that he succeeds in maintaining this. How?

Anonymous programmes? The villager will laugh at you. He knows Tom, Dick, and Harry too well for a false moustache or a wig to hide his identity, and the more effective the disguise the more is the audience likely to be distracted from the main job of watching the play by excited wonderings as to who's who. By all means save on the printing by giving only a list of *dramatis personæ*, and save the cast from post-performance

RUDE MECHANICALS

jealousies caused by a helpful and condescending press boosting the wrong person, but don't imagine that you're helping to "create illusion."

The existence of this "identification" difficulty does, especially in the early days of an acting group, dictate care in the choice of play. Beware of plays that hold too strong a love interest, particularly those which contain much realistic love-making. The actors will be afraid of their audience, the audience a little too apt to mix up real life with stage illusion; and here, paradoxically enough, the tendency is not so much towards destroying the fiction on the stage as towards the creation of an embarrassing, and sometimes dangerous fiction in real life!

Finally, the actors hold the remedy in their own hands. As they learn to play with real conviction and belief in their parts, the audience, too, will learn to accept them as characters in a play.

Another way in which the actors can fight this over-consciousness of their identity is to make and maintain stern rules on the matter of curtain calls and bouquet presentations. The minute Lady Teazle steps forward to receive that box of chocolates and the large bunch of tulips she becomes Miss B; Sir Peter, bashfully accepting his box of cigarettes, is no longer Sir Peter: *but* they are still in costume, and make-up. Worse still, the anticlimax, if the youthful Ben Z jauntily removes his red wig at the curtain-call, to prove that he's not really Tony Lumpkin, but a dark-haired, handsome enough young fellow really. . . . "Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the Weaver . . ."

The stage, whether a rigged-up platform of the village

THE ACTORS

school, the round O of the Globe, or the revolving miracle of Drury Lane, is the home of illusion. Not until amateurs themselves learn to keep it so will they be able to train their audiences into accepting them as actors and lift audience and stage alike into that temporary "willing suspension of disbelief" that is the inspiration of all theatre.

CHAPTER IV

LEARNING TO ACT

“Take pains ; be perfect.”

I

“THEY'RE very good, don't you think ? Of course, they're only amateurs ; just ordinary village people. Some of them haven't been on a stage before in their lives. . . .” What really lies behind this kind tolerance of the village effort ?

To begin with, it probably means that the show has been full of mechanical, technical faults—some small, others glaring—which a little more knowledge on the part of actors and producer would easily have remedied without marring the simplicity and sincerity which is the chief recommendation of the players' work. When a professional is hard up to find something good to say about amateur work, as often as not he damns it with the equivocal word “sincere.” He probably means “amusingly naïve and hopelessly lacking in technique.”

Here are some imaginary extracts from notes which might have been made at such a performance : A's entrance fozzled because he tried to close the door with the wrong hand—he'll probably tell you that the door wasn't there even at the dress rehearsal and he'd always

LEARNING TO ACT

imagined it as opening the other way. B, obviously used to rehearsing with his hands in his coat pockets, found that doublet and hose left them vaguely adrift, without anchorage. C was inaudible. D was perfectly audible, but somehow line after line which ought to have got a laugh met only with silence or a vague titter. In contrast to this, the parting embrace of E and F (funked at rehearsal) met with a gust of hearty laughter. Faces met, but a child could have ridden a tricycle between their legs. G, who according to stage directions "explodes in a gale of laughter," twittered for a brief second like an agitated canary, then, himself alarmed at the odd sound, took refuge in silence and a toothy, soulless grin. He, too, had thought it would "come all right" on the night. Now every one of these mistakes and misfirings could have been prevented by a little knowledge of—technique is almost too grand a word for the very elementary knowledge of acting demanded.

Let us, in justice to very many excellent village performances, not only say that these mistakes are by no means confined to villages, but admit that this is perhaps an exaggerated example, and also that these people have, at least, put on a show and given a great deal of pleasure both to themselves and to their audience.

Nowadays the means to remedy such faults are ready at hand for any enthusiastic group. But first these faults must be realized as faults, and not merely as fussy criticism by people who take an ultra-serious view of village drama. It is almost as difficult to tell self-satisfied amateurs that their show is bad as it is to tell a woman friend that she looks awful in the expensive new hat she has just bought. One feels either like a bull charging a brick wall or Herod at the slaughter of the Innocents ;

RUDE MECHANICALS

a painful experience in either case. Here is an extract from a report of a village group (published in *Drama*)—"We do not attend any lectures or festivals, as we run our dramatic simply for the pleasure it gives us at rehearsals and production of same." Note "the pleasure it gives *us*"—is it a slip or malice aforethought that no mention is made of the audience?

There certainly is a thrill, exhilaratingly like that of an obstacle race, when a cast that's playing "to amuse itself" is stumbling through a show. They're not *quite* sure if they'll remember their lines—"Haven't looked at my book since the last rehearsal, it'll be fun to see what happens!" "Did the audience notice that cut of half a dozen pages? And wasn't it *awful* when X (due to a mistake of an excited A.S.M.) walked on in the middle of Act Two when it had just been made clear to the audience that he was sheep-farming in New Zealand?" "But I kept my head. Stared round the room as if I was looking for some one and then walked out again. So long as you keep your head the audience doesn't realize there's anything wrong."

Too many dressing-rooms (town and village) are still echoing to this sort of excited post-performance back-chat. A production that is under-rehearsed and full of hazards is much more amusing and exciting to such actors than one which runs its smooth, almost mechanical way, without let or hindrance. Hence the slogans of bad amateur drama, "Bad dress rehearsal, good show." "The audience wouldn't notice." "After all, we're only amateurs." What about the audience?

A golden rule in car driving is that the passengers should never lose confidence in the driver's skill and care for their safety. Even a driver who knows he can

LEARNING TO ACT

take a corner on two wheels should not alarm a nervous passenger by doing so. Precisely the same relationship should exist between the conscientious actor and his audience. The audience must feel that all is going well, and not be subjected to waves of hot embarrassment for the actor's sake. Any seasoned playgoer—particularly a Repertory Theatre enthusiast—knows that warm feeling of "safety" which greets the arrival of certain dependable actors upon the stage—the passenger's confidence in the driver. It is precisely this consideration for the comfort of the passengers which is lacking in a cast of amateurs who are not only content but hilariously delighted to put on a show full of elementary faults and botched work.

2

No one expects a group of people, able to give only a few leisure hours each week to the job, to acquire the ease and technique of full-time professionals. But the audience has every right to expect them at least to learn the first elementary rules of the game. No one would dream of tackling bridge or golf merely by the light of nature "because they feel they'd be rather good."

It is in teaching these first rules that the organized classes and lectures, now easily available through the Drama League's County Committees and the Rural Community Councils, serve a very useful purpose. On the other hand, much of their "missionizing" work is a mistake. For the organizing authorities themselves to attempt to "take in" stretches of dramatically barren moorland, at the request of some local schoolmaster or cleric who has not an already organized group behind

RUDE MECHANICALS

him, is, in most cases, a waste of time. Far better that funds, energy, and a very real enthusiasm should be spent in giving help to groups that have already realized their need for instruction in technique. I could quote more than one example where an attempt to whip up previously non-existent interest in "drama" has ended in an even greater scepticism on the part of the village in general.

What are the snags in this somewhat academic approach to village dramatic work? The successful "drama organizer" or lecturer must combine two attributes. He must "know his stuff" in practice, *i.e.* have had wide experience of stage work—if possible, professional, but most certainly amateur. (The exclusively professional actor would be hopelessly lost in his first dealings with amateurs.) But in addition to this, he must be able to teach, and the combination of good artist and good teacher is a rare one. In case of doubt, preference should go to teaching ability.

But there is also some danger of over-academizing the instruction. At the beginning of the session, as often as not before he has met his group, the lecturer has to draw up and submit (in triplicate) to the local education authority a syllabus of work; a suggested list of plays to be read; an analysis of the steps in teaching "dramatic art." Fortunately, there are many lecturers who succeed, behind this academic façade of syllabus, reading lists, registers, reports on lessons, etc., in fostering real "theatre" in the groups they are helping. What exactly does one well-known Midlands lecturer put on paper as "report on work done in class" when he has turned up in the village school armed with make-up box, a couple of scarves, and changes of coats, so that he may treat the house to three or four songs or monologues in

LEARNING TO ACT

character? Does he write "Instruction in make-up" or "Kept them lively with impersonations of Stanley Holloway, Pellisier, Chevalier, George Formby . . ." ? To say nothing of the witty running commentary which accompanies the job of making-up under the eyes of the audience.

This lecturer has certainly found out how to clear the academic fence which causes the fall of many enthusiastic riders. Such methods need outstanding ability, experience, and certainty of handling. The demand for help through evening classes is rapidly outgrowing the supply of tutors who can give this exhilarating practical touch to their instruction, and there is some danger of the rigidity of the system, and the unending red-tape—obligingly supplied by the education authorities—hampering the entertainment aim which should lie at the bottom of all this work.

This leads us on to a problem directly opposite to the one with which we opened, namely, the danger of an over-earnest striving, on the part of both instructors and instructed, after pseudo-professional technical perfection.

Again I would suggest that the audience and its enjoyment of the show should act as touchstone for the presence of this danger. Another group to be consulted on this point is what we might call the "technical staff"—the stage-manager and his servers and helpers.

To deal with this second group first. Any group of players worth its salt, having embarked on a production, wants to put on the best show possible. Well-primed, during the weeks of instruction in their drama class, with hints on effective staging, costume-making, the manufacture of home-made props, they set enthusiastically to work. As often as not the actors themselves have to

RUDE MECHANICALS

give a hand in all this incidental work—a tiring and a trying job combined with line-learning and the nervousness of an impending public appearance. In many instances (fortunately decreasing, with the erection of more Village Halls) the group is forced to act on a temporary fit-up stage, the room often unavailable until the day before the show. Hot and dusty with last-minute wrestlings with flats, curtain fittings, lighting flex, and unfamiliar furniture, the stage manager scrambles out of his overalls, gets a hasty swill at a small wash-hand basin (cold water), muddles at top speed through his own make-up, or presents himself to a harassed make-up man, panting, “I’m on at the opening,” and ten minutes later is expected to stroll on to the stage, cool and immaculate in eighteenth-century costume. And professional actors, to whom the stage is second nature, prepare themselves for such a part by at least an hour’s rest in the afternoon and complete relaxation before preparing to walk on to the stage! No wonder the dressing-rooms on the last night often resemble an obstinately cheerful morgue or a home for neurotics.

Then, the making of costumes. Here is an extract from a report on a summer school held to train amateurs. “One student, a tailor by trade, supervised the making of the men’s clothes and helped them to dress.” What a holiday, what a change and fascinating hobby for a tailor! And how many carpenters by trade give up hours of their spare time to more carpentry, under conditions—draughty barns and bad lighting—hopelessly inferior to normal workshop conditions specified as necessary by the Board of Trade? How many of these sigh, “never again!” after a first burst of enthusiasm has let them in for hours of overwork and worry. There is a sort of

LEARNING TO ACT

saturation point beyond which enthusiasm and keenness defeat their own ends, beyond which the labour we delight in ceases to physic pain. And when it actually entails extra hours and over-concentration on a man's (or woman's) everyday job, then indeed does "this drama business" become an oddly paradoxical form of "education for leisure !"

3

And now, how far does this new striving after almost professional efficiency affect the audience? Up to a certain point, *i.e.* in the elimination of the gross faults already mentioned, since such mistakes are bound to distract from the illusion of the play, up to this point any sensible group will take full advantage of the opportunities offered of acquiring a little acting technique. But there is a saturation point for the audience too.

In real community drama, actors and audience must keep to common ground—actors, of course, in the van of a movement forward. But the vanguard must not lose touch with its supports, and after twelve or twenty-four weeks of intensive study of drama under expert encouragement and guidance, an intelligent acting group will be pulling well ahead of the rest of the village in matters of theatre. This will be discussed more fully when we talk of choice of play and presentation; enough here to suggest, for careful consideration, the danger of over-educating the acting group beyond the audience to which it is going to play. Not only is it likely to endanger the entertainment value of the players in the eyes of the village, but it may lead to difficulties later in gaining new recruits. The "drama" is apt to become

RUDE MECHANICALS

the preserve of a locally manufactured brand of intelligentsia of which those who were not in at the beginning fight shy.

Do I mean that first-class acting is wasted on villagers ? No. Nothing of the kind ! A group of professionals, the late Arts League of Service, for instance, is not " over the heads " of the audience they play to, provided always they choose the right programme. But remember these very expert players have worked through the initial stages of acquired technique, the actors' growing pains, to the ease of its apparently unconscious use. It takes much time and much hard work before the spare-time actor and producer can acquire this ease, and the intermediate condition is too often a painfully self-conscious one. Secondly, the professional is no part of the life of the village. His professionalism, his temporary sojourn in the village, makes of him a puppet, a being apart; precisely what must *not* happen to the real village player.

The crux of the matter can probably be found in a question raised by an American visitor at a recent Conference of instructors on Village Drama. " I don't quite see what you're trying to do. Is the aim to educate the villagers or to give them entertainment ? " The answer, vague and typically British in its compromise, was " Both." But the leaders of the village drama movement and every individual group of players must come to a much clearer decision than this, as it affects the whole question of instruction in dramatic art. Is it the education that is to be incidental, or the entertainment ? Ultimately, the stress is bound to be felt on one side or the other.

Is the paternal despotism of the Universities over village drama an ominous sign ? What motives really

LEARNING TO ACT

lie behind this "provoking of Drama" in the villages? The village actor has obviously much to learn in order that he may satisfy himself that he is getting the best out of his hobby, and in order that he may be able to give lively and effective entertainment to his audience. At present—except in certain lucky groups where there is, on the spot, an expert willing to give the necessary help for nothing—the only means by which the villages can acquire this minimum of technique is through the good offices of the local education authority. Let the village players beware, lest, in the flood of registers and syllabuses in triplicate, they quench the torch of spontaneous entertainment handed on to them from Greek shepherds, mediæval craftsmen, and riotous Christmas Mummers.

CHAPTER V

WHAT LANGUAGE ?

"Speak to 'em, I pray you, in wholesome manner."

I

If all the pens which have been picked up in order to dribble out ink on the question of dialect were placed end to end, they would reach to . . . exactly where they have arrived—just where they started. There are people who wish to stamp out dialect altogether, and hope that in time every Englishman (granted the normal organs of speech) will use a standard language, bearing no doubt the Grade A stamp of the B.B.C. What a relief for foreigners ! During a recent visit to the U.S.S.R., in one of my lighter moments (perhaps it was the vodka) I sang "On Ilkla Moor Baht 'At" to a group of Russians, most of whom spoke excellent English. They asked me in what language I was singing. I replied that it was the dialect of one of our national minorities. Followed questions on the customs, habits, and costume of Yorkshiremen ; and what was the difference between them and the English !

There are die-hard dialect enthusiasts who fight to maintain these regional, and, be it noted, class distinctions. Mrs. X, wife of a successful business man on

Tyneside, speaks a tongue easily comprehensible to Mrs. Y, wife of a well-to-do Cornish farmer. Possibly they went to the same boarding-school. But a Tyneside and a Cornish collier scarcely seem to possess a common language. The dialect die-hards encourage its use in village drama; even go so far as to suggest it should be taught, in order to preserve it from threatened extinction. Its vowel sounds should be studied, and, where necessary, clumsy speakers of dialect should be corrected and taught the true sounds.

Then, of course, there are the compromisers who, more than half convinced by the arguments in favour of a standard English speech, are yet sentimentally loath to let go the "picturesque vigour" of native dialect. (These same people probably weep over the disappearance of the airless, bug-ridden, and foully insanitary thatched cottages in the same districts.) Such half and half enthusiasts suggest that the village children should grow up bilingual, as in Wales or the Gaelic-speaking districts of Scotland. One advocate of this system damned, to my mind, her own argument when she went on to say that such children "speak standard English to us (*i.e.* 'the gentry') and dialect among themselves." Here, immediately, the analogy with Wales and Gaelic Scotland breaks down. In Wales, sermons are preached in Welsh. Do the parsons of Somerset, Devon, or the Yorkshire Dales preach in dialect or standard English? But surely the Parsons count as "gentry"? That's exactly the point.

Whatever may be the merits and beauty of true dialect (in the villages we are less concerned with bastard makeshifts), one fact is patently clear: that nowadays the use of dialect has become a badge of class. The

RUDE MECHANICALS

snobbery works both ways. Your demagogue will cling consciously to crudities of speech, proud proof of working-class origin, as obstinately as the upper ten will wince or laugh at its "vulgarity." Worse still, in a mistaken effort to fraternize, the Oxford-finished politician will sometimes attempt the tongue of a Yorkshire pit village, only to make himself and the tongue he essays the butt for laughter. It is as if he went about in a scarf when he can well afford a collar and tie. Or perhaps the lad who has "worked himself up," consciously or unconsciously adopts the language of his new surroundings and immediately he sets up for himself a barrier between his old life and the new. Much of this probably applies more urgently to the North, where, even in country districts, industrialism has left its mark ; but to a very great extent the problem is present throughout the country.

Thanks to our public school system, which creams off the children of the professionals and the gentry and carries them from their homes to various centres of standardized education, speech is a stamp of class origin. An interesting comparison could be made here, if space permitted, with the speech in the country districts of Scotland where the school system is so much more democratic.

If hard and fast class distinction and privilege is commendable, and at all costs to be maintained lest the very pillars of society tremble, then let us respect and join in the moans of the die-hards who lament that the children of farm labourers are fighting shy of the stark, native speech of their elders. And let us also prevent embarrassing confusion of tongues by insisting that these children of farm labourers remain in that state of life

WHAT LANGUAGE ?

to which it has pleased economic circumstances and the accident of birth to call them.

2

And now for this "bilingual" compromise, already existent in fact, but not, for that reason, of necessity to be recommended as a system. Its chief merit is, of course, that in its intention it saves dialect from the official condemnation of being "vulgar." But does it in fact ? Standard English is taught as a sort of Esperanto for use in other districts and when in conversation with the gentry. Immediately various practical difficulties are bound to arise.

To begin with, dialect is not a different language, as the analogy with Welsh or Gaelic would assume. There are many words that are the same in both, but dialect speech calls for a difference in pronunciation. Take, for instance, the U sound in Yorkshire. How joyously the Southerner giggles over the catchword, "Oop fer t'Coop"—not that this conveys accurately the phonetic sound of the dialect. Now the word "cup" is common both to standard and to dialect English. A child likes a hard and fast ruling. "Which is right ?" is a constant question on his lips. That one and the same word should have two permissible pronunciations, though typically English, is, nevertheless, illogical. Sooner or later the child will adopt one or other for constant use, or, inquiring further, he will come to the conclusion that one is for use in the classroom, when talking to teachers, inspectors, and on other grand occasions, the other for use in the home, lest he affect to be superior to his

parents : and back we are again at the old position—dialect is “common.” If we are to make the children consciously bilingual we are bound to give some indication as to when each tongue should be used. There is only one answer, and that answer, willy-nilly, underlines class distinction, for the teacher in the village is considered to be on the fringe of the professional and gentry class.

“All you’ve said may apply in the north, but not in the genuine dialect-speaking counties. The West-countryman, for instance, doesn’t feel in the least like this. He’s got no self-consciousness whatever about this class-distinction you’re talking so much about.” Quite. Nor, do I suppose, could he give you a chemical analysis of the air he breathes, but that doesn’t constitute a challenge to the truth of the scientifically proved formula.

There is another factor that works strongly against this iron-lung treatment, this artificial respiration for dialect. A sure-fire joke for a comedian, a popular number in a jazz-band programme, a “plum” of a character part in a play, is ready to hand in dialect. Gracie Fields, Stainless Stephen, Stanley Holloway, all owe their reputation to their exploiting of dialect. The Western Brothers have, to some extent, turned the tables by holding up to ridicule the public-school accent and idiom, making, as it were, a dialect out of the language of the upper class. The B.B.C. does its helpful little bit in assisting, with kindly modulated voice, Derbyshire shepherds and Gloucestershire pig-feeders to the microphone. . . . The essence of humour lies in incongruity. Now a man fighting against prejudice, stupidity, dislike, is a noble figure, but to strive against laughter is to court defeat. If you speak the tongue of

WHAT LANGUAGE ?

Stainless Stephen or Gracie Fields—or even the true dialects which resemble their urban mauplings of the English tongue—the odds are that you will meet with the laughter associated with their performances. Only recently a visitor to the north told me he wanted to laugh every time a Yorkshireman spoke to him—"It sounded like a turn on the radio !"

3

So far, we have not discussed the first of the solutions proposed on this dialect problem, namely, that education will gradually impose a standard English speech throughout the country. Now, on paper, this looks like an obvious and sensible way out, once we have overcome a certain sentimental regret. But it's not so easy as that.

To begin with, in the country districts, with which we are at present primarily concerned, who is to be responsible for the teaching of this standard tongue ? Experience in a Training College has shown that the standard of speech amongst future elementary school teachers, though steadily rising, is not yet a matter for wholesale congratulation. In the past there have been instances of hopelessly pedantic and inaccurate pronunciations being taught that fell lamentably between the two stools of dialect and King's English : *e.g.* a long sound in the final "ain" of mountain ; "ate" given the same value as the same word with the "h" added ; "says" carefully pronounced as "say" with a "z" added (this last fault fostered by pseudo-dialect writers who spell it "sez"). Now this is all very sad and much to be deprecated. It has led to a great deal of inaccurate and would-be "re-

RUDE MECHANICALS

faned " speech of an admittedly lower order than pure dialect. But it is a weakness that can be, and is being, remedied. Few inventions or improvements, no forward movements in society, have been without mistakes. But that need not dictate a retreat. Instead, it calls for care and perseverance in our training of those who will be responsible for the teaching of English to the children in our villages. We can't put back the clock, but we can see that it keeps correct time.

As we are here primarily concerned with the problems of the village, the bastard dialect of the towns might appear to be outside the question. But, as we have said before, it is not so easy nowadays to draw a hard and fast line between town and village. Especially is this true in the field of drama, where plays from all districts, town and country, are equally available to the group of village amateurs. Even the dialect enthusiasts weep sad tears over Cockney vowel distortions, and any one who has lived in a northern industrial town knows that the so-called dialect is a conglomerate of careless articulation, bad grammar, and mispronunciation—laced nowadays with Hollywood Americanese. Occasionally a picturesque phrase still survives, relic of pre-Industrial Revolution days, and there are odd words of true dialect (" laik " for " play," nowadays used almost exclusively for the closing of works or pits). But to give this jargon the dignity of dialect and to try to defend it as such is to take up a hopelessly false position. And yet plays are written in this mutilated tongue and called dialect plays.

For the present we will postpone the discussion of the dialect play and get down to the question of what we propose to do about the speech of the village actor. Should a serious, conscious effort be made at speech-training and voice-production ?

The fault quite rightly feared by most amateurs is inaudibility. Feeling that the stage calls for an exaggeration of normal speech, the raw amateur takes refuge in flat-voiced shouting that, whilst making each word audible, forbids any possibility of emphasis and tends to render the lines meaningless. The unaccustomed exercise of reading aloud during the early rehearsals is apt to result in the same stilted, uninflected interpretation of lines.

Here again we come up against the question of dialect. Let us assume that, knowing many of the group do not speak standard English, we have chosen for them a dialect play. Copies of the play are handed round, and we meet for a reading. The actors have, of course, learnt to read. Some of them read very well indeed, others perhaps with a little hesitation, but all are accustomed to associate *print* with standard English. To find out what I mean, try this experiment : hand one of these dialect-speaking actors a newspaper, ask him to read (silently) the account of, say, a motor smash or a court case. When he has read it, ask him to tell the group about it. What you will hear is an unconscious translation into his speaking tongue of the standard English the meaning of which his *eyes* have transmitted to his brain.

RUDE MECHANICALS

Now go back to the printed dialect play. The actors, used to reading standard English, which they understand very well on the printed page, suddenly find the tables turned on them. Their eyes meet lines like this—“ Ah sh'd think so ! Ah sh'd ha' shouted fer t'porters an' gi'en her i' charge.” Having slowly stumbled through the phonetic sounds, the reader sees daylight and the line is repeated, eyes away from the distracting printed page. Away from the immediate district where such sounds are phonetically correct, the line will convey nothing. Time and again I have found dialect-speaking actors hopelessly stumped by a phonetically *printed* version of their own tongue. I have had to read it for them, and they have repeated the lines after me, usually correcting my intonation.

There is an old West Riding story of a bow-legged collier who went to be measured for a suit. The tailor began to make careful measurements and calculations. “ Tha's takin' thi time ower it ! ” commented the miner. “ Well, you see,” replied the tailor, “ you're not an easy man to fit. I must take special measurements for the trousers.” “ Tha means ah'm bow-legged ? ” “ Well—er—yes.” “ Thee mak' 'em straight. Ah'll bend 'em ! ” (The imitated script here is for the benefit of southerners !) It seems to me that this story can usefully be applied to the dialect problem. Dialect is a spoken, *not* a written language, except to a few specialists who have painstakingly acquired an eye for dialect in print. But if, except for definite dialect words and idioms, the dialogue is written “ straight,” the players can be depended on to “ bend it ” to their natural speech. This is particularly true of those who memorize quickly and make the meaning of the line their own from the very first. If

WHAT LANGUAGE ?

Shakespeare heard a group of Yorkshire village actors playing Bottom and Co., he'd probably have difficulty in recognizing his own script.

This method has been tried, and has been found to result in easy, natural speech, varying from player to player. A, whose normal speech is broadly Doric, "bends" the original lines almost beyond recognition, whilst B probably only colours his lines by a certain characteristic intonation and a broadening of vowel sounds. The result is a convincing approximation to everyday life. Naturally, casting must suit the parts.

A secondary consideration, which should, however, recommend itself to playwrights, is that "straight" dialogue is more adaptable to the dialect of different counties. Devon or Yorkshire can act the same play, each group stamping it with the native trademark.

But many village groups are not content with the obvious dialect play. They turn to the classics, to Shakespeare, at certain seasons they want to act religious plays. What are we to do about this ? Are we to train them in standard English, constantly correcting and instructing ? Are we to set a standard so far from truth that we subscribe to the following Church Magazine comment on a local Nativity play, that "it rather jarred on one to hear the shepherds talking in 'broad Yorkshire' " ? Tact, discretion, and patience are the only answers. Use your natural dialect speakers where they are needed—as, in my opinion, for the talk of simple shepherds. Casting plays a very important part. A Casca, who almost ostentatiously sticks to his local accent, is a good foil to a more carefully speaking Brutus or Cassius, and what's more, true to character. As the players become more trained in dramatic sensitiveness they realize the

need to adapt their speech, and tactful help and suggestions will be welcomed.

Repeated work on plays in "literary" English is an excellent training in good speech, and the change comes almost unconsciously. Miracles will not be performed overnight, and in the early stages the dialogue may be as "bent" as in the topical plays we have already discussed; but if it is real village drama, the audience, with ears accustomed to such speech, will find nothing incongruous—if the choice of play be right. Gradually a respect for well-written dialogue grows amongst players and audience alike. Here, perhaps, is an instance of the incidental educational value of village drama. Thanks to the radio, even remote villages are becoming more and more accustomed to the sound of standard English. The villager welcomes clear, understandable speech, and, though he sneers at obvious affectation, he has nothing but admiration for well-delivered, straightforward English.

As for the technique of stage-speaking, here again, in the early stages, the help should be incidental. To start out with instruction on voice-placing, diaphragm breath-control, etc., is to court disaster. The raw player will greet this either with open disgust, and fail to turn up again, or adopt it with a self-consciousness that will ruin the spontaneity which should be the key-note of his work. Let him experience his difficulty, how to get and hold a breath for a long phrase that would be ruined by a pause, then show him how to overcome it. Probably others in the cast will be intrigued; they'll wonder if they could manage any better. And then the lecture on breath-control, with a few amusing exercises thrown in, comes as a mere incident in a rehearsal.

And so, in this, as in so many other directions, the

WHAT LANGUAGE ?

policy of peaceful penetration gradually overcomes language and speech difficulties. Dialect falls into its natural place in the right sort of play, whilst standard English begins to meet with the respect it deserves. The village group moves on to fresh experiments, and, though by no means despising its native tongue, is rescued from the ranks of those who, having piously subscribed to the new handle, bow down in awed worship before the parish pump.

CHAPTER VI

WHICH PLAYS ?

“Is there no play ?”

I

THE sane, normal villager who once or twice a year attends the shows of the local Players has a completely mistaken notion that when the days begin to lengthen and the amateur actors' evenings are given up to haymaking and harvest, the responsible officials of the group dismiss all thought of “drama” until the next September. How they would like to ! If Gilbert were alive to-day he would pillory the amateur producer, and, in fitting the punishment to the crime, shut him up in a cell with a never-decreasing pile of plays—one-act for festivals, three-act for village performance—and amplifiers droning out “Find a play with eight women and two men. . . . A play for five hundred and sixty women. . . . A play suitable for a Parish Tea. . . . A play for three men, a child and a tame rabbit. . . .”

But it doesn't need Gilbert's venom to inflict such torture. It is the common summer occupation of the rehearsal-worn producer. Even on the last night of the last show the whisper has been going round—“What are we going to do next ?”

WHICH PLAYS ?

We have already touched once or twice on this problem of choice of play, but each time we have gratefully found reason to set it on one side. Now, like the harassed producer, we can shirk its serious discussion no longer.

There are two lines of approach to this subject, and where the lines cross there is your play. Sounds simple, but there are many things to be taken into consideration each time you graph out your lines—for straight lines only cross once, and you must start afresh each time. The two lines of equal importance in community drama are : what do the actors want to do ? What does the audience want to see ?

2

First of all, let the Play Selection Committee, in the privacy of the consulting room, set bounds to the question by the qualification, "What *can* the actors do ?" or, the question usually uppermost in such discussions, "What *can't* the actors do ?" To begin with, what are the wrong sorts of comedy for a village group ? At the head of the list I would place all slick West End society plays. I don't say indiscriminately *all* West End plays. Occasionally one crops up, a Priestley play, for instance, out of which the village players can get, and give, a considerable amount of enjoyment. And a genuine village audience is not staled or made over-critical by experience of expert professional performance. But it is obvious that the village actor will do justice neither to himself nor to his play if he dabbles with the "staggered" matrimony of Noel Coward or Dodie Smith's calf-love-for-iron-grey-hair complications. So, on the actors' side we can cross

RUDE MECHANICALS

out all such plays, in spite of the fact that a well-known "village" producer included *Strange Orchestra* in a broadcast list of plays recommended for village reading.

Continuing this process of elimination, we must add to the impossible plays those costume comedies, classical and otherwise, which call not only for slick, sophisticated speech, but the wearing of costume "with an air." To the argument that the actors themselves enjoy them (which I question), or that the audience is not sufficiently critical to note lapses, the reply is that the comedy of these plays lies in the satirizing of the very airs and graces which the village player cannot accomplish, and the best-intentioned audience in the world cannot laugh at a joke that isn't there. So, from the point of view of both stage and auditorium, such plays as *The School for Scandal* must be dismissed from consideration; though, for a mixed group of "residents" and true villagers, plays like *The Rivals* and *She Stoops to Conquer* stand consideration.

Another type of comedy that must go, again vetoed from both angles of approach, is that in which the cleverness of the dialogue is dependent upon a literary or cultural background of which players and audience are equally ignorant. It is, of course, possible to explain such allusions to the Players; though rehearsals broken into by miniature lectures on English literature offer a dreary prospect, and such a policy may also lead to the danger, already mentioned, of educating the playing group beyond its audience. An instance of what I mean is to be found in the "patter" of the compère in *1066 and All That*. "Richard I. was always dashing off on a Crusade. He used to go to France and then across the Mediterranean. That's why he became known as

WHICH PLAYS ?

Richard Gare de Lyons." And, of course, those of us who have crossed Paris to catch the Marseilles express from the Gare de Lyons, *we* laugh ! In a large provincial theatre I heard this sally fall as flat as an underdone pancake.

An unsophisticated audience is always a little apt to take a well-staged, efficiently produced comedy just a little more seriously than one might expect. In the early stages of their education in theatre, the elaborateness of some of the unaccustomed trappings is likely to awe them into a respectful attention that can only be broken by obvious jokes of their own salt—in the jargon of the professional comedian, by a few good "belly-laughs." Use this test, then, on the proposed comedy, and unless the dialogue is rich in fairly obvious wit and humour, turn the play down.

Another type of comedy where, perhaps, there is greater danger of tempting the actors, is that which guys the amateur and inexperienced actor and holds up to ridicule the contretemps of an amateur show. This may be full of laughs for the actors themselves, but is likely to leave an audience either uncertain or frankly bored. For one thing, to *act* the part of an inexperienced actor calls for almost professional skill. It takes a clever man to play the fool, and it takes a very clever actor to make it clear to the audience that he is *acting* a bad actor and not just being one ! Furthermore, half the jokes in this sort of play are jokes only to those with backstage and rehearsal room experience. Such plays offer a bright and amusing evening for a Players' reading, but become stale to the actors in rehearsal and dull to the audience in performance.

The right sort of comedy ? Study the mediæval farces,

RUDE MECHANICALS

the old Mummers' Plays; listen to the stories told in the pubs (these will need some careful censoring), the village forge, the sewing meetings. You'll soon find out what makes the village audience laugh. The grand old stuff of comedy, character that's recognizable as true to the life they know, and situations farcical but not impossible; the dialogue forthright and discreetly salted, sometimes verging on the nonsensical. In a scholarly history of the Mumming and Folk Plays, Dr. E. K. Chambers quotes the following: "I went on a bit further, I came to King Charles up a cast-iron pear tree. He asked I the way to get down. I said put thee feet in the stirrup iron and pitchee poll head fust into a marl pit where ninety-five parish churches had been dug out besides a few odd villages. . . . I went up a straight crooked lane. I met a bark and he dogged at me. I went to the stick and cut a hedge. . . ." "It is the folk at its worst," comments Dr. Chambers. But echoing round such nonsense it is not difficult to hear the voice of Launcelot Gobbo, or of Tony Lumpkin's "Keep straight forward till you come to four cross-roads—but be sure to take only one of them," and the confused directions that follow; and only a few nights ago a radio comedian's "I knocked on your mother and the door came out." The folk at its worst? Let the scholar continue to think so, but let the village producer neglect such signposts to the choice of successful comedy at his peril. One of the sure-fire laughs in Gregson's *Devil a Saint* is Josiah's line, "Ay, and you were behind before besides!"

WHICH PLAYS ?

3

Having suggested what comedies not to do, and given some hint on what to look for in the right sort of comedy, let us vary our fare by a consideration of the possibilities of tragedy and drama. Perhaps here actors and audience are more likely to find themselves at cross purposes.

On the whole, drama, setting aside for the moment the question of high tragedy, is easier than slick comedy for the inexperienced actor. It is easier for him to create inside himself and to convey to an audience the deep and broad emotions aroused by some strong situation, than to work for laughs at jokes that have grown familiar to him. The laughter of an audience is much more likely either to intoxicate a highly-strung actor to over-playing or throw a nervous one out of his stride, than the sympathetic silent attention that is usually given to an emotional performance. Playing in drama also calls for a fair amount of concentration inside an actor's own imagination, and this helps him to lose an embarrassing stage consciousness ; sincerity of feeling can carry him through a wholly convincing performance during the two or three nights of most amateur shows. It is because of this that the thriller and the strong dramatic play are popular with most amateur actors. They feel they have something they can get their teeth into—"a part to tear a cat in, to make all split."

High tragedy is a different proposition and craves wary walking. It demands a restraint and a dignity, in both acting and production, that comes not too easily to the inexpert. Sincerity, of course, is a help, and that natural, dignified simplicity that is more often found in the villager

RUDE MECHANICALS

than in the glib and sometimes superficial townsman. But this, unfortunately, is not enough. Such plays are almost always of outstanding literary merit and too often call for a high standard of diction and technical skill in movement and gesture, not only from the leading players but from the supporting cast. If heaven has blessed a rural group with a few who can attain this, then let them, at least once in their history, give to themselves and their audience a taste of the best of the theatre.

But the risk of a descent to bathos, or to a mere pathetic whimpering which undermines the whole aim of tragedy, is very real. The *Tragedy of Nan*, for instance, can easily become an affair of whimper and sentimentality.

And now to consult the audience on this question of strong drama and tragedy. The general consensus of opinion seems to be that "the audience likes a good laugh." This attitude is often over-respected, and, what is more, it is not entirely true. The solution seems to lie in a careful inquiry into what the village audience likes to laugh about, and what it is willing to weep over.

The old gag "It was a grand film ! I did enjoy it—cried every bit of the time," is true to audience-psychology. Drama, like all art, is a patterning of the stuff of life ; the job of making up into an attractive costume the yards and yards of slowly unrolling material of which we see neither the beginning nor the end. I never cease to marvel at the courage of humanity in its optimistic persistence in the face of so much pain, misery, disease, and under the shadow of the apparently unreasoning descent of death. One of the chief factors in maintaining this courage, perhaps *the* chief factor—witness the grim joking of soldiers in the trenches—is the gift of laughter. In sheer self-defence we have learnt the trick of shuffling

WHICH PLAYS ?

the jig-saw bits of our everyday life into laughter-rousing designs, and when we have looked upon it so, and eased ourselves with laughter, we feel the better for it. The man in the street (whether villager or townsman) wants to see the stuff of his own life so juggled with. "We see enough misery and unhappiness," they will tell you, "give us something to laugh at." And so, when these people see the everyday life of their own experience on the stage, they prefer to see it in the shape of comedy, or in the melodrama where, though trouble and anxiety may agitate the middle act, honesty, love, and goodness finally come to their own.

But there is another side to this. Present in all of us is an instinctive craving after the exercise of pity and fear. To keep this active by facing up to the truth in the very stuff of our own lives, demands, however, either the trick of an artistic impersonal approach, or, as in the would-be reformer of society, a purpose that transcends the shock of individual pain. In either case, the contemplation of the immediate, living stuff of tragedy demands courage. At a generous estimate, only three or four per cent. of a normal audience is prepared to take up such an attitude. If the play touches too closely upon their own lives the shock of its reality will outweigh the catharsis of "pity and terror," and the play is condemned as "depressing."

There is nothing surprising in this. Just as a dreamer eases his worries through symbols and disguises, and is shocked into awakening should the image of the worry itself invade the dream, so is the dream-illusion of the stage broken for the audience when reality encroaches upon it.

The modern realistic "drama of protest," with its cry

to the audience to "face the map of its own fate," offers no argument against this. A study of the Left Wing Theatre will show that the aim is to excite anger and action, not pity and terror. *Waiting for Lefty* and *Bury the Dead* are not depressing, but exciting, provocative. But to most of our village audiences and players this is (perhaps unfortunately) beside the point.

How, then, are we to satisfy this need for tragic experience and yet not depress our audiences by underlining for them the less pleasing aspects of life which they already know too well? The answer is simple enough. Let our tragedies be dressed in the trappings and circumstances remote enough from the everyday experience of the audience to avoid self-pity and depression, and yet true enough to the universal stuff of human nature to prick their emotions into activity. Hence the appeal of historical tragedy. It is painful enough, but not too painful. As a change from laughter at his own life, the villager is prepared to weep—at some one else's. The small pit village will appreciate the tragedy of *Riders to the Sea* or *Campbell of Kilmohr* (disguised symbols of the tyranny and danger under which they themselves live), but would jib at stark presentation of colliery disaster. Another village, where the audience's grandparents have seen whole farmsteads, school, schoolhouse, the village mill (and "78 tame rabbits"), swept away in a dam-burst, takes a proprietary pride in a play on this disaster, and receives Sladen-Smith's *Assyrian Afternoon* with ready sensitiveness to the atmosphere of the impending Biblical Flood. But such an audience would resent serious dramatic interference with its present tragedies and difficulties. For most villages are conservative-minded and have no desire to be pricked into anger or protest.

What room are we to give to fantasy in our village players' programme ? Fantasy seems to be of three kinds. The first—often thought to be of recent growth, actually the earliest and most persistent form of all when we remember Aristophanes (*The Birds*, *The Frogs*, *Lysistrata*) and the mediæval, semi-dramatic *Vision of Piers Plowman*, or the seventeenth-century *Pilgrim's Progress*—is the presentation and discussion, under the symbols of fantasy, of social and political questions. Such plays, partly for the reasons pointed out in the last section, partly because, except to the politically conscious, the symbols are too difficult to interpret, have no appeal to the village audience and very little to the players.

The second type still keeps in the land of unreality—complete escape—but the ideas which it conveys are clear, pleasing, sometimes perhaps a little sweetly sad, but comfortable and heart-easing. They are a joy to eye and ear, and, as often as not, tickle the intelligence without over-exciting it. A good example of this style is Laurence Housman's *Prunella*. Sad, but so unreally sad that we smile tenderly as we wipe our eyes ; and the play is seasoned with witty, pungent dialogue that stings the palate like the tang of salt on an almond.

Such plays make a great demand upon actors and producer. They should not be attempted without very careful weighing up of the ability of the cast and the possibilities of the stage (of which more anon). Neat, good, but unaffected diction is necessary, combined with grace and nicety of movement and gesture. It is the ideal type of play for experienced " residents " who wish

RUDE MECHANICALS

to give the village a treat. By groups of genuine village players such material should be warily approached. If a play like this is well staged and well acted, the audience will probably enjoy it, even if after the performance enthusiastic comments are mingled with some expression of perplexity or of some scorn at its unreality. An unsuitable group will find such plays elusive and harassing in rehearsal. Their performance will be anxious and tentative, and the audience will be first puzzled, then bored, and afterwards more than likely to dismiss the play as "stuff for the kids."

But in this group of fantasy are plays (few and far between) such as *Lady Precious Stream*. This play, though wholly fantastic and introducing the alien conventions of the Chinese theatre, is of far stronger and heavier weave than the moonlight and gossamer of the Columbine-Harlequin variety, and therefore more to the style of the village. Its playing is far more within the skill of the rural player than that of airy-fairy fantasy. Much of the characterization is drawn in clear, often heavy lines. There is a reasonable amount of broad humour, opportunity for slap-stick, and the situations are easy to follow. The part of the Property Man offers just the right sort of chance for the dry humorist of the company.

The audience may encounter some initial difficulty, but a pre-curtain explanation is by no means out of place in a village show, and much can be done by the style of presentation (*e.g.* the abolishing of the front curtain, costumed programme-sellers, pictures and lanterns in the auditorium) to let the audience know from the start that they are in a Chinese theatre. Programmes could, of course, be printed backwards, or even in Chinese,

WHICH PLAYS ?

but this is probably carrying naturalism a little too far !

The third type of fantasy, the easiest for the actors and most understandable by the audience, is the Barriresque trick of using the stuff of everyday life, but cutting, snipping, and fashioning it into an entirely fantastic shape. *Dear Brutus* and *The Admirable Crichton* are obvious examples. They call for more skill in the players than straight comedy, because the acting must strike the hair balance of being temporarily convincing and yet manifestly impossible. The actors' playing must make clear to the challenging realist's "But this couldn't possibly happen !" the playwright's ingenuous argument, "We know it couldn't. But think what fun if it did !"

Not easy for the inexpert to reproduce in flesh and blood on an intimate stage those odd, half-real dreams that come between sleeping and waking. Here again presentation is half the battle. When the dream-fancy breaks cover from reality and begins (usually in the second act) to lead us on a fantastic chase over a dream landscape, the atmosphere of the play will stand or fall by sets, lighting, and costume.

There are more grim types of fantasy than this, themes which play with the stuff of real life and yet demand an atmosphere of the unreal in presentation and acting. Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound* is an example ; Clemence Dane's *Granite*, too. The eerie atmosphere that surrounds the Drowned Man must be made clear from the start, as he leans against the doorpost, a Boris Karloff-like make-up lit by the sickly-green moonlight.

And here we begin to come full circle again and to re-approach the thriller. For the thriller is a sort of fantasy to the villager, safe and remote as he is from gangsters,

RUDE MECHANICALS

crooks, jewel-thieves, and a world in which, if you're not stumbling over some one else's body, you're about to be made some such stumbling-block for another unwary walker. Where would you place *Murder on the Second Floor*, or *The Bat* and its mock supernatural? Thriller or fantasy?

Am I encouraging the village amateur to act thrillers? By all means. Why should the townsman get all the fun? But they must be able to hold the pace, and this is a very big "but." There is no doubt that such plays will be to the taste of the audience when they are well done. They are well salted with humour of dialogue, character, and situation, but they demand slick handling and careful, spirited production.

5

Where have we got to so far in this question of choice of play? I am setting aside for separate treatment the choice and production of religious plays. We seem to have spent a great deal of time suggesting what can't be done, but that isn't very helpful unless it has laid bare a clear approach to the right sort of play.

There is one appeal, for both actors and audience, that is common to the right sort of comedy, drama, and tragedy. This appeal, which cannot fail to interest the audience and inspire the actors, is that of a clear, straightforward story portrayed in foursquare, true-to-life characterization. That is why fantasy and the superficial drawing-room play so often fall short of what is wanted. I have heard it said that the appeal of the stage-play to the unsophisticated is a harmless sublimation of

WHICH PLAYS ?

the love of gossip. "Gossip," said Mr. W. H. Auden recently, "is the art form of the man and woman in the street . . . and the great subjects for gossip are Love, Crime, and Money." Follow this up, and you have an infallible guide to the choice of the right play.

Test the story : If Act One happened in the village, would it keep the gossips' tongues wagging in anticipation of what was going to happen in life's second and third acts ? Test the characters : Will they arouse keen discussion of their motives, their goodness or badness, laughter at their oddities, anger or regret at their mistakes, conjectures on their previous history ? The fourth-wall theory of the stage comes in useful here. How many a worthy village gossip would love to sit outside the house of her neighbour, that baffling fourth wall conveniently removed, noting and commenting on what goes on within ; laughing at the antics of one, uttering sage warnings that nothing but disaster can come of the mistakes of another, curious to see how the inevitable disaster will finally arrive. And this, the age-old law of the theatre, truth to life, is still the acid test.

And now the dialect enthusiast descends upon me with a triumphant shout, "All you have just said proves beyond dispute the popularity of, and the need for, the dialect play." All right. No one's contradicting. By all means play in dialect if your players and audience are consistently dialect speakers ; and, *if you can find enough good dialect material, choose dialect plays*. Remember, I've already drawn a distinction between the play that gets itself, as it were, played in dialect and the one that is consciously written so, with much painstaking insertion of the apostrophe of omission (heartily cursed by typist and print-setter !). *The Land of Heart's Desire* uncon-

RUDE MECHANICALS

sciously twisted into the burr of a Yorkshire Dale retains its simplicity and the poetry of its appeal more poignantly than when played in careful poetic and elocutionized style. It has found once more the almost primitive simplicity that first inspired it. In criticizing the vogue of the dialect play, my quarrel is not with the use of dialect and the presence of local idiom on the village stage, which are inevitable if spontaneity is to be maintained, but with the dearth of worth-while dialect material. Most of the dialect plays upon the market are written by amateurs expressly for the amateur player. It is an open question whether these playwrights are consciously (and if so, mistakenly) writing down to what they consider to be the village level, or whether they are themselves incapable of finding and treating themes of finer quality. The fact remains that the great majority of such plays, chiefly one-acters, are trivial in theme, superficial in characterization, and obvious, often silly, in plot. It is not dialect that makes them negligible. Most experienced groups turn away from them because they offer no scope for serious work, either comic or dramatic.

The popularity of Irish comedies with village amateurs—*The White-Headed Boy*, *The Far-Off Hills*—should teach our own dialect writers a lesson in the sort of thing that is wanted. Eden Philpotts has done his duty by his native county; Gregson has often successfully caught the note and colour of Yorkshire small-town life; Brighthouse has done something for Lancashire: but these are not primarily concerned with the village. From these established writers of long plays to the amateurish trivialities of most dialect one-acters (Bernard Gilbert is an honourable exception) the drop is abysmal.

WHICH PLAYS ?

Let each district of England, with a living, wholesome dialect, pray that, before it is too late, there may arise from amongst its writers one, at least, with the heart, the keen eye, the ear, and the pen of J. M. Synge, who realized that "in countries where the imagination of the people and the language they use is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. . . . On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy. In Ireland . . . those of us who wish to write start with a chance not given to writers in places where the spring-time of the local life has been forgotten and the harvest is a memory only and the straw has been turned into bricks."

Is it too late ? Is the harvest too long past in our English villages ? Is the straw already baked by educationists and social organizers into the bricks of suburban villas ? Why is it that only our novelists can seize upon this poetry and ripe reality ? Emily Brontë, Hardy, Richard Jefferies, Mary Webb, Sheila Kaye-Smith, the Powys Brothers, Adrian Bell. . . . *But where are the dramatists ?*

CHAPTER VII

PLAY-MAKING

"I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream."

I

AT a recent gathering of "authorities" and workers on village drama, the guest speaker, Mr. Cecil Day Lewis, coined a significant phrase when he reminded those present that their task lay not so much in bringing drama to the villages as in provoking it *from* the village. We are perhaps twisting Mr. Day Lewis's meaning a little, but justifiably so, when we make this a text for pleading that the true village play can only be written by the village, or, taking exception to the word "written," *made* by the village.

This difference between writing and making a play is an important one, and may have much to do with the bemoaned lack of acting material. In considering the printed script of a play we have to allow for the possibility of error in two directions. In the first place, how far do those black and white symbols really convey what was once a coloured, living, and vivid thing upon the stage (for the present I am leaving out of consideration the "virgin" play, written in the pious hope that it will some day find marriage with a stage)? And, secondly,

PLAY-MAKING

when a printed play is acted, what fresh errors or changes in interpretation may occur? The printed script of a play is either the record of some previous and adequate performance, or of an imaginary and perfect performance that has been given on the mind-stage of the maker of the play. How often does one find that a play that "reads well" is disappointing on the stage, and, contrariwise, on re-reading a play that we have seen and enjoyed (particularly a comedy), how often have we found the text a dull and disappointing thing? To my mind, Shakespeare's chief justification to supremacy amongst playwrights is the fact that, to the non-literary, his plays are confessedly dull until seen on the stage.

Let us then, in considering the making of a play in our village group, rid ourselves of this over-reverence for pen and paper; this too often repeated, "Oh, how clever to be able to *write* a play!" The writing of plays should be no more than the deft jotting down of what is done and said, first, tentatively on the stage within the playwright's mind. This is later shaped and fashioned by living actors on a real stage. And the final "play" (as we shall have need to note elsewhere) is not the typed or printed script, not even the movements and speeches of the actors, but all this welded into a presentation before a live audience.

Again to quote Mr. Day Lewis, "Without actors a play is impossible; without audience it is emotionally meaningless." For drama is the subtle something that is provoked within each member of the audience. A play that does not succeed in pricking their emotions, whether to laughter or to tears—or to the many intermediate stages of emotional sensitiveness—is a failure, simply because it is not a play at all, however useful it may be as

RUDE MECHANICALS

a literary or philosophic exercise. How small a part, then, in this making our play, is the ability to spell, to punctuate, to turn a sentence that is free from grammatical error. And how large a claim upon the attention must a knowledge of our potential audience make when we are conceiving our village play !

2

Mr. Robert Newton has written a stimulating book * on the improvised play, in which the essentials of real drama receive their often neglected due. He stresses the usefulness of themes from newspapers and established stories (our "gossip" test of the last chapter) ; he does not fear the obvious, but he lays useful emphasis upon the central need of conflict and movement in live drama. The astonishing thing is that he builds this fascinating house of many mansions on the slender and fallacious ground that "for a large proportion of the population, whose education ceased at fourteen . . . the learning of words is too much of a mental effort." Surely here he has gone astray ? Psychologists tell us that the ability to memorize is entirely unconnected with formal education ; indeed, the trick of mechanical memorizing is more likely to desert one as the reasoning power becomes more highly trained. The dull child learns the geometry theorem by rote ; the intelligent one grasps the line of argument, ready to reconstruct it when called upon. Cecil Sharpe found an old woman in Northumberland, ninety years old and without a day's education to her

* *Acting Improvised*, by Robert Newton (Nelson).

PLAY-MAKING

credit, who still retained 10,000 lines of ballads. And I have myself seen, in amateur groups of mixed "cultural origin," Training College and University lecturers groping for their lines and helped out by a kindly prompt from factory worker or farmhand. The embarrassment of the printed page to the less well-educated lies not in any difficulty of memorizing, but, as has already been pointed out, in the early readings before memory has come to the player's aid. But this point is probably a small one. The rest of Mr. Newton's book brilliantly and boisterously distracts one from the initial false premises.

Improvisation, harking back to the true theatre days of *Commedia dell'arte*, to the gags and interpolations of the Mumming and Folk Plays, is one of the sure means of beginning to build the plays our villagers really want to act and our village audience to see.

The printed text of a play—with dialogue, moves, often gestures even, all ready and neatly planned—too often short-circuits the imagination of the player. A slick enough performance can be given without the players ever really getting to the core of their parts. The slighter the scaffolding of prepared script offered to him, the more dependent is the actor upon his own imagination. It is in this training of the imagination that the secret, not only of acting but of sound play-building, lies.

"X enters a room and finds his most trusted friend kissing his (X's) wife." Now take that up and act it out as a scene in a play. Thick and fast must come the questions upon which not only the individual's, but the acting group's imagination must exercise itself: "What sort of a man is X? Is he in love with his wife? Has he suspected her before? Has he planned to catch her? Is

RUDE MECHANICALS

the whole thing a 'frame-up' on the part of X and his wife to catch Y? Who's fault is it that Mrs. X is in Y's arms; Mrs. X's or Y's? . . ." And to answer these questions the actors are bound to fall back upon their own experiences, emotions, and observation; and the nature of their background is sure to reflect itself in the final shape such a scene would take.

The training of the imagination is not an encouragement of mere fantasy-building; it is the calling up and ordering at will of what in your own experience is true to life. "Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine, and at last you create what you will." This is sadly torn from its Shavian context, but what better encouragement could the builder of a *real* play find? And that's the trouble with so many of these so-called village plays; they're not real, in either their humour or their pathos. They're flat, cardboard, painted imitations.

Improvisation quickly teaches a group that is learning to make a play what situations are undramatic, dead-ends to action—X and Y enter by opposite doors, both draw revolvers and shoot each other dead; well, presupposing you have only two actors, you can't go much further with that scene, can you?—and what sort of material lends itself to development, conflict, and surprise. Meanwhile, since none but the actors themselves know more than, perhaps, the bare outline of the story, the rest of the group serves as a convenient meter of audience-interest. A well-inspired gag will get its immediate reward of laughter; experiment will teach the actors how interest can be roused by a sudden move or an effective gesture. The action will become their own, instead of a careful following of stage directions. What

PLAY-MAKING

better training in real theatre can an actor have ? “ But we’re not talking about training actors ; we’re discussing writing a play.” By your leave. We’re discussing *making* a play. We’re discussing the actors themselves making their own play, and this can only be done by actors who know what “ theatre ” is.

Intent upon their game of improvising, the actors will soon discover that situation and characterization are one and indivisible. How are you to carry through that scene between X, Mrs. X, and Y unless you have a clear-cut idea of their characters, and the skill to convey this to an audience ? X may be a passionately jealous Othello, or he may be like that pathetically nasty piece of work in *Touchwood* who confesses that “ he’s used to his wife going on like this.” “ You’re not likely to find anybody like that in the village.” Exactly. We want characters true to the village ; and the village actor, unhampered by an unreal text, will strive with his imagination until he has created them.

3

How much nearer are we now to the much-desired Play ? These excursions into improvisation are all very well as Christmas party charades or as exercises in the rehearsal room, but they’re not plays. They’ve no shape, no climax, no theme or “ spire of meaning.” The actors themselves will discover the same thing : the need for shape—for a clear explanatory opening, for development and action, for climax and a final curtain. Soon they will learn to settle these points before starting to present their story. Already they are engaged upon the making of a real play.

RUDE MECHANICALS

And where are they to get their stories from ? We've mentioned the newspapers, but perhaps we want something more characteristic of the village than that. Local history is a never-failing source ; and local legend, not only of the dim past but also of recent years. A very slight plot can often be made the excuse for shrewd characterization and dramatic comment. It is worth remembering, too, that a pseudo-historical setting—something vaguely mediæval, say—can give an excuse for colourful costumes and interesting setting without in any way impairing the modern truth of the characterization. 1538 or 1938, human nature remains pretty much the same, and the natural, modern dialogue will help to make the past live better than all the careful, pedantic “eftsoons” and “by’rladies” of the pinch-beck “historical dramatist.” (The infinite possibilities offered by the Bible story must be left for separate consideration).

Now all this is preparation for the moment when there comes into being a play which can be rehearsed, shaped, and worked up into something that is to receive its consummation when presented before an audience. And now, at last, we call upon our scribe to set to work. There will be a pruning here ; a filling out there ; careful consideration of staging conditions. Perhaps this same scribe was the one who originally suggested the plot and theme of the play and offered the actors some slight scenario to work on, some hints on types of character to be portrayed. If so, this task of pulling the play together into a permanent, presentable form will be a particularly pleasant one—like preparing blooms for a flower show after many patient months of tending the young plant.

And the text which results is now not the tyrant but

PLAY-MAKING

the servant of the actors ; a record of their own creation. They no longer "obey" the stage directions, but *recall* them with the aid of the script. And when this play becomes "theatre" on the night of the show, the audience will pay its glad tribute to the warmly familiar fare of their everyday lives which has been garnished and served up with the seasoning and sauce of pattern, suspense, surprise, and a rightly conclusive issue.

And now we must wake up, and admit all this to be a counsel of perfection ; the longing dream of an enthusiastic visionary ? Yes, if you must be pessimistic ! Nevertheless, the conviction is a sincere one, that only when the village actors themselves take a large and practical share in the shaping of the play can that play really be a part of and a revelation of the life and philosophy of the community. That part may only consist of the "bending" of straight dialogue into the idiom of the district, or it may be that the local playwright has consciously set to work and written the text of a play beforehand, carefully creating characters fitted to the ability and physique of a familiar group of players. But even in such a case, the play is still as much the players' as the playwright's, for it is they who have invaded the stage-mind of the writer and there set to work on a ghostly improvisation, whilst the "scribe" settles eagerly down to take note of their antics.

CHAPTER VIII

STAGING

“There is two hard things ; to bring moonlight into a chamber . . .
and present a wall.”

I

THERE is one aspect of choosing or devising a play to which we have so far given little attention. Having considered actors and audience, and gained some rough idea at least of the type of play we wish to act, we must now consult our stage manager. And it is he who will blue-pencil many a play of which actors and audience would enthusiastically approve. I have no doubt that Noel Coward's *Cavalcade* would delight the village ; I may have some slight doubt as to the actors' ability—but not much. But it needs no blind dog to tell us that such a play is impossible upon the village stage.

The boasts of village producers work in the reverse direction to those of professionals. These vie with each other on vastness of stage and complication of machinery. “The stage of the So-and-so will hold twenty live horses and six elephants.” “That's nothing. We can build a whole tenement house on ours, and then swing it round to show the rooms from the back.” “Child's play,” crows a third, “last year we staged the full Grand National, Becher's Brook and all, with real racehorses !”

STAGING

Not so the village amateur. "You know our stage is only eighteen by twenty, before you've curtained it off. And our lighting's very poor. Only one circuit." "What? And you're wondering what to put on? Why ours is only fifteen by twelve and we've to run our lighting off car batteries. But we put on *Toad of Toad's Hall* last Christmas." "You people don't know what producing is. You're pampered," pronounces a third. "Why, we've only a fit-up; acting area five feet by four, and we're not allowed to start putting it up until the schoolchildren have gone on the Friday—same day as the show. We've nothing but oil lamps. By the way," he adds modestly, "our last show was my own adaptation of *Chu Chin Chow*, and what's more, we got away with it." The others gaze in silent reverence, though perhaps wondering what precisely his last phrase means.

Here, in a ludicrous nutshell, lies the whole problem. It is the presence of this problem that seems to make it wiser to talk of "village theatre" rather than "village drama," for there is often a tendency to discuss plays in the abstract, forgetting not only the difficulties of presentation, but the all-important fact that a play doesn't exist at all until the moment the curtain rises and the action begins to unfold before the eyes of an audience. All the rest—the printed text (no more a play than a music score is a symphony concert), the actors, the hours of rehearsal—are mere preparation for the birth, renewed each evening of the show, of that joint human experience best expressed as "theatre." Here lies the secret of the magic of the theatre, true survival of the days when the crowd cheered the mock Dionysus or waited, on a June morning, to welcome and share in the pageant of their faith.

There is neither space nor necessity here to discuss in detail the mechanical ways and means for effective and simple presentation on a small stage. That has been done elsewhere more efficiently than I could hope to do it. But there is room and need for some discussion on the part played by presentation in the whole make-up of what we have decided to call "village theatre."

Dr. L. du Garde Peach gives an amusing account of how the Great Hucklow Players decided to put Mr. Lipscombe's *Clive of India* on their small village stage for its first public showing. This play had originally been devised for the stage at Drury Lane (or a similar one), with stage directions to suit the vast possibilities of such an acting area, where there would have been plenty of room to include live elephants to give "local colour." "But at Great Hucklow," comments this producer with pseudo-diffidence, "we didn't bother about the elephants." This remark should be taken as a slogan by every village producer—"Don't bother about the elephants!" From its production on the stage at Hucklow, the play found its way to the West End—still without the elephants. By the time it reached Hollywood, where a herd of elephants would have been a mere drop in the ocean of large-scale production, it had been proved that elephants were unnecessary.

Now the moral of this is, that in considering the possibilities of a play for the village stage, those responsible for the decision should start, not from a superficial reading or outside conception of the play, and certainly not from a presentation of it seen in some large pro-

STAGING

fessional theatre, but from inside the play itself. Nothing is more discouraging, nothing more uncreative, than this job of pruning away impossibilities from a first grand conception. It evokes a pessimistic outlook from the start ; an impoverished attitude of " what we must do without."

The right approach, the approach that is full of thrilling possibilities and a glowing sense of creation, starts with a clear-cut, practical conception of the bare set-up on which the group can work ; and on this, bit by bit, the essentials of the scene find their place. Admittedly, even then, quite a number of plays will be found to be impossible, but not half as many as would appear to be so when approached from the wrong angle.

3

" That sounds all right on paper," grumbles a producer, " but get down to brass tacks. Listen to these stage directions : ' The play is played out in a large vaulted room that has been the kitchen of a twelfth-century castle. Of the castle interior nothing is left but the stone staircase and the huge fireplace ; but later comers have roofed and partitioned the vast empty square and made a snug enough farmhouse of it, though the stone walls and spy-hole windows contrast oddly with more modern touches.' . . ." (We have mentioned *Granite* so often already that it might keep some unity to use it again here.) " And our stage," continues the sceptical producer, " has an inner playing area of ten feet wide by eight deep ; helped out by a four and a half foot wide apron that stretches to the full eighteen feet across

RUDE MECHANICALS

the schoolroom. Kitchen of a twelfth-century castle, indeed ! And a play that needs atmosphere ! ”

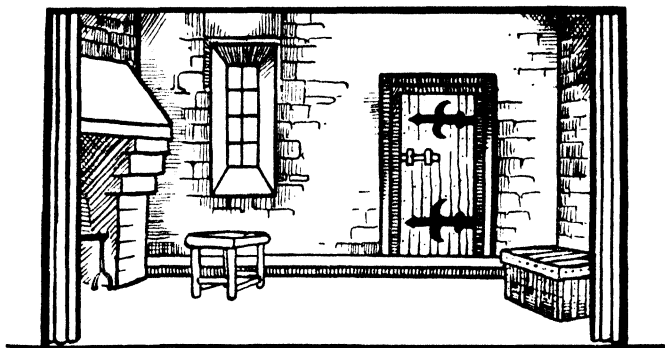
It is precisely this “listening to the stage directions” and trying to follow them in detail that causes all the trouble. The wise producer will concentrate on the play itself, and then build up, in his imagination, a picture *of his own stage*, set and furnished to convey the theme and meaning of the play. He must not allow any stage directions to conjure up a mental picture of an ideal stage of which he can make no use ; nor must he think of that castle kitchen *as* a castle kitchen. This may sound difficult at first ; it grows easy with practice. But he must know the play—know it as intimately as he knows the feel of an old and favourite coat.

First of all, reading and re-reading the script, meditating on it in his bath and his bed, he will find odd phrases of dialogue that linger and echo. “As hard as the granite itself. . . . These stone walls will never burn. . . .” Stone walls, then. That’s easy. Only a matter of grey distemper and a few lines on the stage flats. “Anger . . . fear . . . loneliness . . . spaces of the sky and voices of the waves at night. . . .” Space, emptiness, beyond the slit of the window that the audience can see ; space only, beyond the door when it is opened. Blank, blue backdrop. Voices of the waves—Columbia Record Y.B.7, Sea Wash and Breakers.

Another time, he sees suddenly a picture of the door as it flies open to reveal the Drowned Man. If you turn to the stage directions you will find, “A man’s figure pitches forward and falls across the threshold.” But the producer, thinking in terms of his own stage, has forgotten, if he has ever noticed, this. Automatically his mental image has adjusted itself to the fact that the village

STAGING

schoolroom has no balcony, that the auditorium floor is not raked, and therefore a prone figure would be invisible to all but those in the front row ; this, quite apart from the fact that the player he visualizes as the Man is six feet four, and if he fell full length would occupy more than half the depth of the stage. All this he might give you (like St. Joan) as practical reasons, if you pressed him afterwards to explain his changes, but at the time of his



first " vision " he just *knows* that the door at the back of the stage bursts open and the Drowned Man is seen *leaning against the doorpost*, the light from a strip above the doorway (yes, he think in terms of stage-lighting, not of vague moons) casting queer shadows and green high-lights on his ashen face.

Again and again in the play he hears this Man's laugh, but realizes that he cannot see the Man distinctly. Examining his own mental picture more closely, he finds that the Man is sitting in the wide fireplace, a square gap in the right-hand stage wall, more than half off the stage. Then he realizes that the Man never lies on a sofa at all

RUDE MECHANICALS

(stage directions say "Judith and Penny have wrapped the stranger in blankets and lifted him to a roughly made bed near the fire"), but "came to" sufficiently for Prosper to help him over to this chair half off the stage; and from that moment the half-hidden corner is associated in everybody's mind with the Drowned Man. Even though half the audience cannot see him at all, they know he is there, and time and time again his harsh laugh rings out and chills their blood.

It is possible (though at present unprofitable) to work through the whole play in this way, to show how, gradually, that tiny stage takes upon itself the scene and atmosphere for this strange, evil-haunted play. By the time rehearsals start the producer is familiar with it, experiences no sense of being hampered. He sees that the players work strictly within what is to be their playing area, and the result shows an ease and smoothness that wins astonished comment from pampered urban amateurs who play on extravagant stages of eighteen feet by twenty. But remember, don't bother about the elephants, and think of your play from the start only in terms of your own stage.

This method of approach applies equally to the presentation of the more realistic play. The "elephants" in such cases usually consist of large settees, where an armchair would equally well serve the purpose. A small oak chest can take the place of a sideboard; Miss X can slip off-stage to play the piano (probably a gramophone record), and can even manage one or two words of dialogue from so safe a vantage point. The illusion of the kitchen or sitting-room is much more likely to be attained on a stage that isn't cluttered up with all sorts of unnecessary oddments that have probably only found

STAGING

their way into the stage directions through the playwright's desire to "dress the scene." Get an artist's eye for the essential, and remember that all art is selection, not reproduction.

4

The staging of fantasy offers its own peculiar problems. The main difficulty here is not so much the size of the stage as its intimacy with the audience. At most village shows the front rows of seats are only a few feet away from the players. In such circumstances much ingenuity must be used if the necessary atmosphere of unreality is to be evoked. Skilful lighting is the chief secret, and dark, if possible black, curtaining is needed to give vagueness and depth to the stage.

In such plays, too, speed matters a great deal. If the curtain must be brought down between scenes, every possible effort must be made to shorten the interval. This means that elaborate changes cannot be attempted or the players will have to start from scratch again in building their atmosphere—to say nothing of the dangers of the sound of obvious scufflings effectively smashing any illusion of unreality that may have been obtained.

The intimacy of the stage will also dictate details of costume. Columbine, for instance, would be well advised, on so intimate a stage, to adopt the three-quarter length ballet costume of the early nineteenth century, or devise some original adaptation of the traditional dress. The most comely pair of legs in the world, controlled by the most expert ballerina, cannot hope to appear ethereal to an audience only six or eight feet away—to

RUDE MECHANICALS

say nothing of what Mrs. Grundy will have to say about it.

The bizarre, fantastic comedy, on the lines of the mediæval farce, stands a better chance on such stages. Flat, vivid splashes of colour on grotesque cut-outs are equally effective from front or back row and can help considerably in setting the key of unreality and fun. It is not difficult to design a scenic joke ; but again, don't overdo it. A clatterment of painted jokes is as bad as a stage overcrowded with furniture. Once the design has been drawn, the actual painting, done in large areas of flat, contrasting colours, is no more difficult than painting a wall or a door.

5

Talking of painted sets, is it necessary in these enlightened days to remind producers that a well-lit, pale blue backing gives an almost unbelievable depth to a small stage, whilst an elaborately painted backdrop, particularly at such an intimate distance, is irritatingly distracting and obviously artificial ? Perhaps it is necessary, when one recalls a West End production of a play, the scene of which is set in a small hotel on the Scottish coast. Through the open doorway was visible a backing of cliffs and sea. The action spreads over several hours, but during this time, not only did the tide cease motion, but the white bursting crests of the restless Atlantic were frozen into immobility and seemed to stand a-tiptoe whilst live and moving actors fumed and fretted out their trivial matrimonial and erotic complications.

To return for a moment to our suggested production of *Granite*, where, more than in the light-hearted West

STAGING

End comedy, it is essential that our audience be made aware of the ever-present and threatening sea. It is also essential that the audience know that the sea and the cliffs are visible from the kitchen window, where both Judith and Prosper have important lines and "business" to put over. Here is another example of how an artist lets himself be guided by the limitations of his material. Since the schoolroom or small hall has no dress-circle or balcony, the stage window can be, indeed will probably have to be, well above a direct line of sight from the audience; if necessary, the actors themselves may mount a step to look out of it. A sky backing is all that is needed—the actors and their lines do the rest. "There's a two hundred foot drop from that window. . . ." The sound of screaming gulls, of wind, and of the monotonous break and roar of the sea can be brought up on a gramophone at appropriate moments. This will build up in the minds of your audience a far more living picture of what lies outside the stone walls of Judith's home than any elaborately conceived and painted backdrop.

This brings us to our last point on the question of presentation. There are more ways than one of building up illusion, more than one door to the imagination of the audience. Just as the eyes of an audience not only watch the actors but are also engaged upon the scene on which they play, so, too, their ears can accept, in addition to the spoken lines, other sounds which help to fill out the presentation. The sound films can teach us quite a lot here. This is a side of small-stage production too often neglected, but it offers infinite possibilities of making up for the lack of stage room. Moreover, sound is *real*, as against much of the artificiality of stage setting; nor is sound cramped by questions of space—it hasn't to be

RUDE MECHANICALS

“scaled down.” Even if space permitted your dragging the cut-out of an engine and carriages across the back of the stage in *The Ghost Train*, it would not be half as realistic as a presentation of the *effects*, i.e. recurrent flashes of light, as from lit-up coaches, and a gramophone record reproducing the sounds of a passing train.

Or perhaps you want to emphasize the eerie stillness of an empty kitchen. Emphasis can only be gained by contrast, so a metronome, its regular, slow beat breaking the silence, will underline the stillness for you, and by its attack on the ears of the audience, help to concentrate their eyes and their imagination.

To sum up, the more apparently limited are the ordinary, obvious means at the command of the producer, the greater joy will he find in devising new and subtle ways of catching up his audience into the magic of “theatre” which he and his players have built from the inspiration of a printed text, hours of work, wooden posts and platform, and a few dozen yards of canvas or curtaining. And then, not only will he “not bother about the elephants,” but should a well-intentioned passing circus offer him the loan of its prize performers, he will reject them with all an artist’s scorn for the non-essential.

CHAPTER IX

RELIGIOUS PLAYS

"Of God's Son of Heaven he spoke up word."

I

THAT drama is the child of religion is a platitude of the theatre, and yet, paradoxically enough, here in England from (and even before) the Reformation down to our own day, the stage has had no more bitter enemy than its parent, the Church. (Perhaps it may be argued that, since the Reformation, the English Church is merely fulfilling the rôle of the traditional stepmother.) How are we to resolve this contradiction ?

It is important that we should try to do so, particularly when we are dealing with the village, for the Church and the parish priest still hold strong sway in rural life, even though Sunday congregations may be diminishing. What is the thread that binds together religion and drama ? Is the bond as strong in our own day as in the past ? These questions are peculiarly important for the amateur player, since we must remember that religious expression by means of drama has usually been in the hands of the amateur and not of the professional. And here, perhaps, we have a clue to the explanation of why the mother Church should have been engaged on so long and often so bitter a fight with its child the Stage.

RUDE MECHANICALS

There is need to draw some distinction between the stage and drama.

From Roman times onward the professional actor has been looked upon askance by the self-consciously right-living citizen. From the days when Mark Antony's affairs with leading actresses called forth the strictures of the worthy Cato, the pious Cicero, and indignantly moral Roman matrons, down to the dubious eye turned nowadays upon the matrimonial give-and-take of Hollywood, the actor's morals have been under suspicion. It is beside the point here to look for an explanation; the fact remains that for many centuries the lives of the professional players and mountebanks in no way gave the lie to public opinion. The player's roving life made him the envy of the domestically-tamed, and therefore the object of their bitter attacks. The very nature of his job, of course, brings an actor's sincerity under question. How can you tell when a good actor is lying? Poor Thespis was scolded by the moral Solon for lying and deceit when he made proud display of his ability to impersonate several people, to pretend to be what he was not (ominously enough, his first bright pupil was a politician). The wandering professional players of mediæval and Elizabethan times were classed as rogues and vagabonds, and only managed to set foot in the halls of respectability by enrolling themselves in the service of some influential man of the court, or, when greatly favoured, of the King or Queen. But this, though it brought them safety before the law, brought them no approval from the upholders of orthodox religion.

It was because of the Church's abhorrence of the lives of the professional players that, when the sacred mysteries of religion were to be given increasingly elaborate

RELIGIOUS PLAYS

dramatic expression, the honest private citizen was called upon to take part, rather than that the morally-soiled hands of the professional should handle the holy themes. And so we find the Church frowning upon the actor, and yet encouraging drama.

But soon these amateurs in their turn brought upon themselves the Church's disapproval. This time it was not their private morals that were in question—permanent residence in a small town or village is, to most people, sufficient safeguard of an orthodox morality—but the clergy became uneasy about the new elements that were beginning to creep into the play-acting. Neither church nor churchyard was a suitable spot for the horse-play and bawdry that were gradually introduced into the plays. Though these interpolations were the result of no lack of respect for the sacred stories, but rather the proof of a very real and robust belief, the shows were banished to the quarters to which they rightly belonged. Abelard is said to have made philosophy the talk of the man in the street; the mediæval gild actors made religion his entertainment.

2

But this was not banishment; it was a new and a welcome freedom. The mediæval Rude Mechanicals brought with them from the Church the framework of their story, their theme, and an all-powerful reason for acting. And in this new freedom they were able to weave into the warp of their religion the weft of their everyday experience. The Shepherds to whom the Angels sang their first Christmas Gloria were no longer vague supers

in the story of Our Lord's birth, but full-blooded characters, who grumbled at the weather, tracked down and punished a cheating friend. In the Wakefield Shepherd's Play, almost immediately after the horse-play of tossing the thieving Mak comes the vision of the Angels; close on the scene of roguery where the shepherds crowd round the "cradle" of the stolen sheep, comes the simple spectacle of worship at the Manger of the Christ-Child. And the prototypes of Mak and his three friends, standing watching round the wagon, knew, as no sermon or distant priestly rites could teach them, that it was into a world like their own that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." *Us*—the liars and the tomfools, who shivered when the wind was cold, and grumbled at the long hours of waiting and watching out on the hills in lambing-time, and yet knelt in hushed reverence before the miracle of God's love and a Saviour's birth. The vague theological "Word" was, indeed, made flesh.

And how does the mealy-mouthed "faith which asks no questions," or the alternative sneering scepticism, compare with these mediæval Christians' frank tackling of the problem of the Virgin Birth? We are told that the scene between Joseph and Mary, with its railings upon a woman's suspected incontinency, is "offensive to the modern Christian"—though of late years there have been found those with courage to present it—but these actors knew that in real life this was precisely the situation that would occur. It was the strength of their double faith, both in the truth of life and in the truth of their religion, that gave them the courage and the imagination to create real drama.

Though the Reformation did not immediately put a stop to these plays, the changing beliefs whittled at them, and the general spiritual uncertainty of the times robbed them of their force and appeal. Certainly the reformed Church, with all its suspicion of outward embellishment of its faith, could not but frown upon such apparent irreverence and Popish parades. And so drama faded from the religion of the people, and, frowned upon by the scribes and Pharisees, took refuge with the publicans and sinners who crowded the professional playhouses.

The wave of Puritanism that followed, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, widened the breach between Church and theatre and between the ordinary decent people and the theatre. The particular characteristics of Restoration drama—aristocratic and a-moral—were not calculated to make a reconciliation easy.

There is no space here to analyse the various forces that have, until comparatively recent years, contributed to maintaining this divorce. Enough to remind ourselves that the professional theatre continued to be considered the home of vice and, though certain festive occasions gave excuse for the amateur to indulge in a little harmless dramatic foolery, serious subjects, above all, religious ones, were definitely taboo. And both drama and religion were the losers by it. For drama lost its central driving force of a real faith (only to gain new life when, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the inspiration of a social purpose came to its aid), and the Church was deprived of its most effective means of bringing its message home to the very hearts and bosoms of the people.

RUDE MECHANICALS

To-day, one of the most hopeful signs for both drama and religion is that the gap is being bridged. Religious plays are once more coming into their own ; the Bible story is no longer forbidden ground for the dramatist and the actor, and the Church is once more opening its doors to the long-banished child.

We have seen how, soon after the war, the Village Drama Society owed its beginnings to the desire of a small village group to act simple religious plays, and how many other villages followed in their train. The wise parish priest welcomes this desire, since one of the Church's great problems to-day is how to bring its spiritual activities into line with the day-to-day life of the people.

In the village the Church usually has a strong controlling hand over most of the practical problems ; the prestige of the educated country parson (and his position, *ex officio*, on the various parish committees) is such that his word carries more weight than most. So integral a part of the weekday life and business of the village does he become that quite often the spiritual nature of his work is overlooked. The popular parson is accepted on his own merits as worthy to take a lead in village life, and though he may succeed in gathering, Sunday by Sunday, a decently large congregation, a high percentage of these people are only attracted by a personal loyalty, unrelated to any conscious need of his spiritual services. The unpopular parson still commands respect in lay matters by virtue of his office ; but an empty church, Sunday after Sunday, gives him little chance of exercising any spiritual influence. In either case, then, the co-operation of a group of people from the laity of the village who are willing and anxious to bring home to the

RELIGIOUS PLAYS

people in graphic, intimate form the truths of the Church's creed is likely to be most heartily welcomed.

4

And now to look at it from the players' angle. What about a group that has not yet turned its hand to the religious play? What is there to be said that might persuade it to such an attempt? But first, perhaps, we ought to get somewhat nearer to a definition of what we mean, exactly, by a "religious play."

Bernard Shaw claims that his *Showing Up of Blanco Posnet* is a sermon. But there are many, many folk, particularly connected with the orthodox churches, who do not care to hear sermons preached by horse-thieves and illustrated by prostitutes (the Pharisees made similar representations about the company that Christ kept). Admittedly, the theological argument of this play requires a fair amount of intelligence in the tackling, and an audience suffering from shock to its conventional morals is not at its most intelligent. I am not, therefore, recommending this play for indiscriminate village presentation. There are, too, plays with a definite religious theme, and an orthodox religious moral, told in terms of modern life. These are apt to be dismissed by both actors and audience as "pi," and too often also, alas, they offer very ineffective theatre.

For purposes of immediate discussion, then, we will take "religious drama" to imply, as in mediæval times, dramatization of the stories of the Christian faith, and, particularly, of the central story, the birth of Christ—the Nativity Play. The Passion story receives (and

RUDE MECHANICALS

wisely so) less frequent handling. It demands much more experience, both from actors and from audience, and some skill in writing or arranging, since the Figure round whom the emotion centres must be kept off the stage.

But to return to the question of why a Nativity play or a dramatized Bible story should be a recommended choice for a group of village players.

We spoke in an earlier chapter of the danger of a lack of driving force, of a *need* to act, in certain village groups—the sterility that lies behind the cry of “what play shall we do next?” The religious play gives the answer. Nothing will fire the players more, nothing is more likely to put that “little extra” into their work, than the consciousness that they are serving a purpose higher than that of mere amusement. The acting group may not be made up of the more obviously righteous of the parish, but, with the Nativity story at any rate, all are on common ground. If a dramatic version is chosen, or worked up by the players themselves, which keeps to the simplicity and austerity of the original story, there need be little fear of its hold over the players. First, then, act the religious play because your actors will get a new strength and purpose into their playing when they are presenting something that *means* something to them.

Secondly, of course, such a theme also means a great deal to the audience, and so the great purpose of all real theatre is attained by establishing a live bond between players and audience; making of the players the leaders of the community in a joint act of worship. To speak of the religious play as a means of teaching does not mean that the actors are putting before the audience facts

RELIGIOUS PLAYS

of which they have hitherto been unaware. The real truth is that they are repeating for the audience a story that has probably grown *too* familiar, but of which they have never before grasped the real truth and significance. I have been assured of this time and again after a performance of a Nativity play. "Christmas has never meant quite the same before"—this from both players and audience.

It teaches because it vitalizes into a positive emotional belief what is apt to become mere customary acquiescence. And so, in such plays, it is possible to give the audience itself a part to play: they can be asked to join in the singing of carols or the final hymn. Any one who has acted in or been responsible for the production of a Nativity play is not likely to forget the moment when the bond between stage and auditorium has become so tense that the audience, hardly needing the hint on the programme, rises to its feet to sing the Gloria or "O come, all ye faithful . . ."

I hope I shall not be accused of blasphemy when I say that the only other time I have had this experience was when a Soviet audience rose as one man, cheering wildly, as, at the end of *Quiet flows the Don*, the revolutionary army, carrying the Red Flag high in its midst, swung triumphantly down the ramp of a Leningrad stage. The symbol of their very real political faith was before them. Its British counterpart, fluttering on the screen at the end of, say, *The Bengal Lancer*, seems, to 90 per cent. of our audiences, to be the signal for groping for the lost glove or shuffling into coats; or perhaps we're too well bred to show our enthusiasm, or we've got used to the feeling of national superiority, or, far more probably, we know that in this particular case it's just so many feet of

RUDE MECHANICALS

celluloid Hollywood bunkum. . . . But this is beside the point ; the fact remains that I have seen English village audiences with just that one thing in common with the Soviet citizen, a sincere response and a very real need to give expression to the emotions aroused by the graphic expression of something in which it really believes.

Parenthetically, one ought here to draw the attention of the producer to the important necessity of so ordering the tempo and intensity of his production that not until the dramatically right moment is the audience stirred to take an obvious share in this act of worship. It is harmful, both to the audience and to the presentation, to evoke so intense an emotion too early when the need to express it has, of necessity, to remain frustrated. This is a matter that sometimes requires skill if the presentation is at all a complicated one. The dramatic shape of the original story is such that a simple rendering, that keeps strictly to essentials, can be fairly safely left to look after itself.

5

Whilst we are speaking of the simple rendering, it is à propos to point out another recommendation for the Bible story as material for village players. We have discussed already the problem of language and the village actor. The religious play surmounts this difficulty in either of two ways. First, because of the familiarity of the audience with the story, and because of the age-old association between music and religion, it is possible to evolve a most moving presentation by tableaux or silent movement of the actors, backed by music and/or the reading aloud by one voice of the Bible story ; this is

RELIGIOUS PLAYS

often the most suitable method when the performance is given in a church, where the sound of untrained and unsophisticated voices might jar on an audience accustomed only to hearing the Sunday services. Particularly, when a group is experimenting for the first time on such a play, whilst they have still, to some extent, to "educate their audience," they must take special care to avoid the glaringly incongruous.

The second way in which the religious play can steer clear of the language difficulty is by taking advantage of the fact that the most suitable text is that of the Bible itself. This is in simple language: it is also familiar even to the most illiterate. And so strong are its associations that it demands an instinctive care and respect in the speaking of it which does much to free the actor from the inaccuracies and slovenlinesses that are apt to creep into less sacred dialogue. It is natural to handle it with the care that a proud housewife gives to her most precious china.

Away from the actual church atmosphere there is often much reality to be gained by voices speaking in a familiar accent. The appeal of shepherds whose tones echo of the hills is obvious, and I have heard the Virgin speak to Gabriel, in an Annunciation scene, with a Yorkshire burr that gave an unforgettable poignancy to the "lowliness of God's handmaiden," whilst the same lines, self-consciously and preciously mouthed by an "elocutionist" have miserably shattered all illusion. From the severely practical point of view, the village actor can get no better training in diction than that called for by the Bible text; it is the Rude Mechanicals' substitute for a professional actor's season in Shakespeare at the Old Vic.

We have discussed the merits of the religious play from the point of view of the inspiration offered by the theme, and stressed its suitability for untrained actors. One very obvious merit we have not yet mentioned : the tremendous *dramatic* force of most Bible stories, and particularly that of the Nativity. It is too often supposed that the religious play is, of necessity, static and non-dramatic. Nothing could be further from the truth. If it is made so in presentation the fault is the producer's or that of the writer of the script or scenario. Consider the story of the Nativity quite apart from its religious implications.

An obscure village girl, unmarried, is suddenly told that she is to bear a child " Who shall be great . . . the Son of the Highest ; and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David." Measure such a scene by all the canons of dramatic technique. Conflict ? What greater conflict than that of Mary's mingled fear and pride, finding its resolution in her submissive, " Be it unto me according to thy word " ? Surprise ? Implication of tremendous issues that are to follow ? Rousing of interest in character ? Dramatic contrast—the archangel and the village girl ? Then (and here the Bible story and the mediæval craftsmen are nearer to true theatre than we are always inclined to let ourselves go to-day) complications follow. Joseph finds that Mary is with child, and, knowing that he is innocent of having touched her, he is " minded to put her away privily," knowing too well the dreadful fate that Jewish law meted out to an incontinent virgin. Mary is saved by another

RELIGIOUS PLAYS

coup de théâtre : an angel reveals the truth to Joseph. But fear and danger are not yet over for the heroine of our story. Against the background of a Bethlehem crowded with the Jews of the province who have been summoned to a census for taxation, Mary, close on her time, tended by the man who is now her husband, is without shelter, turned away from the inn. And the Son of the Highest is about to be born. The action gathers pace and intensity. Mary and Joseph move to the stable—is this to be the outcome of the archangel's fine promises? The story begins to taste of the irony of Greek drama. Conflict, contrast, irony, gathering tempo towards a climax—what playwright with the technique of ten geniuses could devise better?

And now, true to the requirements of any fourth act, the tension slackens and the scene changes. Wise Men see a star. Shepherds are in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, when suddenly the angel of the Lord appears. Here we have the dramatic “lift” that should come at the end of the fourth act and lead us on to the fulfilment—the “recognition scene.”

Act Five—the Stable. The Child, the Prince of Peace, has been born and is lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling bands. But the whole earth is full of portents; strange lights are in the sky and the King in his palace is stirred to fear. . . . And now, before this manger, and before Mary, who has faced so much of danger, doubt, and fear; before Joseph, who has not wavered in his trust, both lowly shepherds and far-travelled kings bow in worship. “The most fundamental of all beliefs,” says Mr. Stephen Spender, “illustrated by drama and poetry in all history, is the idea of justice.” The story moves on to further episodes: the outwitting of Herod, the flight

RUDE MECHANICALS

to Egypt ; but we can make our pause at the triumph of the Virgin and her new-born Child.

Perhaps this technical handling of the Sacred Story may, to some, seem heartless, blasphemous almost. If it does, they should avoid the production of a religious play. For only when an understanding of the live dramatic content is as clear as the religious faith that burns beside it can the presentation of a sacred theme on a stage effect its true purpose. Theatre is no less theatre when it aims at teaching a great truth. Belief in the story is not enough ; it must be supported by dramatic conviction. Only when the two go hand in hand, inspiring all who are to present it, fusing the cast into unity at rehearsal, and cast and audience at each performance, only then can the stage become a shrine and the focus of a whole community's belief and worship. And those of us who believe in theatre claim no less than this as its province.

CHAPTER X

RELIGION AND HUMOUR

‘When shall we laugh, say when?’

I

IF it should be thought that this discussion of the religious play is taking undue prominence in a book that claims to deal with village drama in general, the defence is that, in our opinion, not until the village has found something it really wants to act, *i.e.* something that it believes in and wants to say, will it tap a living source of strength and inspiration for all its work.

This does not mean that the village players’ repertoire should consist exclusively of religious plays, but that the presence in a group’s work of such a unifying factor, the establishment by such means of a bond between the acting group and its audience, will contribute an integrity to its activities and (probably unconsciously) a philosophic background that will mean new life in the movement. As Miss Kelly says of her own players, “the religious drama gives a depth and body to their comedy, and the comedy prevents the religious drama from becoming preachy.” And it is this link between religious drama and comedy that we must now take into consideration.

Puritanism has a great deal to answer for in this

England of ours, but in no direction do many of us bear it so heavy a grudge as for its wanton destruction of *joy* in religion. Of recent years there have been some signs of this joy returning, though there are still far too many who frown upon it as a return to paganism, or perhaps to Popery, for the Catholic, particularly the Catholic priest, is never averse to a jest on religious matters ; a saint's name (and on discreet occasions even a higher one) is not always considered to be taken in vain if it is used for a funny story.

But it is not always the commonly accepted " funny " thing that causes laughter. There are people whom a sudden revelation of beauty (in nature, painting, music) stabs into joyous laughter, not tears. These are the people who, unlike Keats, can welcome Joy without vain tears at the sight of " his hand ever at his lips, bidding adieu." Enough for them that he is there at all. Perhaps this is the real difference between the pessimist and the optimist. Certainly there is often in sudden loveliness something so joyously right, so ecstatically apt, that laughter is the instinctive emotional relief. David danced before the Ark (though his wife disapproved) ; religious festivals and commemorations are traditionally times of joy, of happy recognition that life, in spite of all its drawbacks, is good. The Puritan spirit frowned upon all this ; it preached a Gospel of fear that makes the Old Testament a record of philanthropy beside it. Protestant Christianity bears the shadow of this frown down to our own day.

Now the fear of laughter is a dangerous thing ; it argues a lack of proportion, a sadly twisted viewpoint. And in matters of religion in particular it is often the symptom of a narrow and a weak faith. Uncertainty makes us chary of argument, insistent upon an unques-

tioning belief; the martinet's method of a teacher uncertain of his ability to command respect by genuine merit or knowledge of his subject; the peevishness of an unsound politician under a heckler's gibes. And deeper than this fear of argument is the fear of laughter. "It is not until faith begins to be weak," says Samuel Butler, "that it fears an occasionally lighter treatment of a semi-sacred subject." The sincere believer is not likely to laugh in the wrong place—his belief is his safeguard.

The mediæval religious plays, as we have seen, used the comic incident freely, and so gave a reality to their presentation. Is it a weakened faith or the relics of Puritan fear that makes us fight shy of incorporating laughter with our religious expression to-day? Admittedly, the church itself is no place for such laughter, but that is because of its intimate association with the most solemn of the mysteries of Christianity. However, since many of our religious plays will be presented in places not so steeped in solemnity, the fact that life has humour in it need not be ignored.

2

From the dramatic point of view, and from consideration of audience psychology, there is much to be gained from giving the spectators a legitimate excuse for laughter in the course of even a deeply serious performance. Particularly this should be remembered and made use of when the presentation is open to the hazards of unskilled playing. An audience, especially an unsophisticated one, that is in a condition of intense excitement, whatever may be the emotion that has aroused the

RUDE MECHANICALS

excitement, is prone to giggle. It is no use bemoaning this fact or lecturing "ignorant villagers" on their lack of good taste. Neither is it of any use to be hypocritical and pretend that this tendency isn't there. It is, and the wise producer, actor, and writer takes it into consideration. Skim off this froth of laughter, then, lest it mar the boiling jam (feminine and rustic metaphor!). Give your audience permissible occasion for laughter and it will be all the more ready to receive with the right reverence the more spiritual aspects of the story.

To illustrate from the Nativity story, since we have so far made detailed use of this, the scene with the shepherds (before the arrival of the angel) and the scene at the Inn offer excellent opportunities for this relief by laughter. And in this latter scene the irony of the turning away of Joseph and Mary is considerably heightened by an atmosphere of carefree indifference inside the Inn. In a Nativity play specially prepared for village presentation, I tried the experiment of introducing a Fool with the Three Wise Men. He follows them, insisting that this new King that is born will need to learn to laugh. When they try to drive him back the Star goes out, or, rather, only the Fool is able to see it, so in spite of themselves they are forced to take him with them. This Fool was a popular figure with both actors and audience, and many of his lines received flattering and frequent quotation, *e.g.* "Life is not a joke, Fool," the Philosopher says, in rebuke. "Not for you, for God afflicted you and gave you brains. And yet, for all your brains, you can't see that Star!" The disillusioned Preacher forgot that it is the thorns crackling beneath the pot that help to warm the broth.

Laughter, then, serves a good use in releasing the tension in the presentation of a religious theme, and, in

addition to helping to ensure against titters at a wrong moment, due to over-intensity, it also gives true dramatic shape to the whole play. Perhaps, sometimes, it is as well to explain to an untrained audience that, at certain points, laughter is expected.

3

Once we have left the New Testament the opportunities for incorporating humour in the presentation of Bible story are considerably increased. Take, for example, the story of Noah. The mediæval play gets much fun out of the idea that Mrs. Noah was very dubious about the Ark and was only with great difficulty and some show of force persuaded to go on board. *Green Pastures*, both the play and the film, makes the most of the chances of humour in the same story: the argument with "de Lawd" over the kegs of liquor, and, in the film, the superb sequence where an already drenched Noah is painstakingly ticking off the alphabetically-ranged animals on his sodden list. The Walt Disney *Flood* (I have forgotten its exact title) is, perhaps, the finest example that can be quoted of humour being used with magnificent artistry to lead one on to a climax of sheer beauty—the perched Ark, the rainbow, and a world washed clear of sin and ugliness. An excellent example, this film, of catharsis (emotional healing) through laughter.

But, indeed, the whole of Walt Disney's work can be taken as proof of the close kinship that an artist can recognize between beauty and humour. In the world of letters and the theatre we find this quality most in evidence amongst the Irish writers. J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the*

RUDE MECHANICALS

Western World is full of such sudden strands of loveliness inextricably entangled in a humorous and even ludicrous situation. Take, for example, Christy Mahon's description of his drunken father, "rising up in the red dawn, or before it, may be, and going out into the yard as naked as an ash tree in the moon of May, and shying clods against the visage of the stars till he'd put the fear of death into the banbhs and the screeching sows." James Stephens, too, has the trick of it; Shaw retains the humour but mixes it with intellectual delight.

Lest this should seem a digression, let us repeat that the aim of the argument is to prove the high share that humour can and should take in effective presentation of a serious theme. Not only can it be used for variety and relief, but, when dealing with the less sacred themes, it can become an integral part of the treatment. Here we have the key to the method often used by modern playwrights—Mr. Sladen-Smith, for instance, and Mr. Laurence Housman in his *St. Francis Plays*. Mr. Sladen-Smith's *Assyrian Afternoon*, which has proved its popularity with both village players and village audience, is a good example of a serious theme played in terms of lightly satirical humour. A group of clearly-characterized Assyrians, on a terrace above the plain where Noah and his sons can be heard building the Ark, carry on a flippant conversation against a grim background of foreboding and disaster.

In presenting this type of play, the chief demand that is made upon the actor is a sound appreciation of human character. The ultimate seriousness of the theme demands it, and it is this which saves the play from triviality. It is humorous in texture, but it has "body" and shrewd observations on life. Such plays offer infinite scope

RELIGION AND HUMOUR

to an actor who is willing to take his work seriously. *Everyman* is a very solemn play and its presentation holds a deep significance, and yet some of the minor characters are full of humorous comment : the boasting protestations of Friendship dwindling away to base desertion of his friend ; Cousin's deft excuse that he (or she) has "cramp in my toe." Such parts are well worth the time spent in studying them, and remind us of what was said about improvisation, in that the text offers little more than a bare scaffolding upon which the actor can set his imagination to work.

4

The village actor's progress will then begin to follow much the same lines of development as that taken in the history of the stage itself. Following up this clue of character presentation as the stage's method of comment on life, the players will find themselves prepared to tackle such work as Ben Jonson proposed for himself in pillorying the fantastic and ridiculous :

As when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits and his powers
In their confluents all to run one way.

And, talking of Ben Jonson, comedy, and village players, *The Alchemist*, with some adaptation, will furnish the actors with many weeks, and the audience with a good two hours, of real fun and sound theatre.

The actor who approaches his work from this angle will soon make the exciting discovery (which, should he know anything of Cinema, he will find further illus-

RUDE MECHANICALS

trated by Chaplin, the doyen of screen comedians) that the "comic" character part entails very serious study and is a much more apt comment on real life than the lay figures of hero and heroine round which the romantic plot of a play may centre. Who would play Charles Marlow or Hastings had he the skill for Tony Lumpkin? What a vast field of plays is open to a group of actors who have been trained in such a school!

To sum up what may seem to have been a most discursive chapter: the associations that surround a Bible story make the actor prepared to accept it as a serious comment on life, material for the building up of an individual philosophy, the true culture that cannot come from without, for "the art of self-culture begins with a deeper awareness . . . of the marvel of our being alive at all; alive in a world as startling and mysterious, as lovely and horrible" (and, with apologies to John Cowper Powys, I would add, "as infinitely amusing") "as the one in which we live."

The village actor finds that humour has its place even where the seriousness of purpose is beyond dispute and where beauty is essential to presentation, and so no longer regards it as something tacked on, superficial, or unrelated to the truth of things. Rather, it becomes a necessary salt in the daily bread of life. He carries into all his work, as a result, a greater sense of reality and a more mellowed understanding. And it is here that we have the beginnings of the genuine "need to act" that we have been looking for, and the beginnings, too, of a taste for sound (though not priggishly serious) theatre that will not allow him to waste time on trivial unrealities.

CHAPTER XI

CENSORSHIP

“ For if the king like not the comedy,
Why then, belike, he likes it not perdy.”

I

POOR Peter Quince ! Shakespeare allowed him respite from none of the multitude of troubles that dog the path of the amateur producer. He had to cope with the actor who wanted to play any part but the one for which he was cast (characteristically, it was this actor who kept the whole cast waiting on the eve of the show !) ; he had to bear with the nervous actor who forgot his lines in sheer stage-fright, and with the nit-wit who mixes lines, cues and all—is it likely that he should be allowed to escape the most fearsome of all bugbears, “ There are things in this comedy that will never please ” ?

The censorship of the Lord Chamberlain's reader is kindness, benevolence, encouragement itself, compared with the rigorous though unofficial tyranny which is exerted locally on the village group's choice of play. This censorship is usually a tripartite one of Church, gentry, and public opinion—the last taking colour from the first two, but adding a few extra vetoes of its own.

We have pointed out in what directions it is possible

RUDE MECHANICALS

for the Church to give encouragement and inspiration to the work of an acting group, and in very many villages this much desired *entente cordiale* does exist. Where it does not, the path of the village actor can be made a very thorny one.

Very often the dramatic society is one of the social activities of the Church itself, and therefore under its immediate control. This is a mixed blessing. It certainly ensures the players an audience, but also it too often means that the main incentive to performance is the maintaining of the Church in funds, and so the primary question in any discussion of choice of play will be "How much profit can we hope to make?" Hence the pestering of writers to reduce or forgo royalties; and since most reputable playwrights seem to have an odd desire to choose for themselves the charity to which they subscribe, and insist upon the Church Sketch Club of Little Muddlewick paying for the use of other people's property, far too often a play is chosen for cheapness rather than for merit. The constant veto is: "We can't afford the royalties."

Then again, identification with the Church forces upon the society a necessary discretion of behaviour similar to that which public opinion forces upon the luckless parson himself. The clergyman, especially in the village, is never allowed to lay aside his clerical collar, nor is the Church Dramatic Society allowed to forget its pious origin. It must choose plays of what is generally considered to be "good moral tone." If this always meant that the plays were to have a genuinely serious purpose there would be no great harm done (except that serious plays that are good theatre are usually expensive). Unfortunately, however, since serious plays are usually to some extent contro-

CENSORSHIP

versial, it is considered safer to keep to "funny" plays; and as these "funny" plays must be strictly moral, the choice becomes still further restricted. Now comedy is, of its very nature, dependent upon the foibles and backslidings of human nature, and it is difficult, therefore, to find a play that does not somewhere offend this artificially imposed "moral tone." Those who have not struggled with this sort of censorship would hardly credit the objections that are raised to apparently the most harmless plays. And, oddly enough, the nearer a play comes to the reflection of the truth, the more likely is it to be banned as "unsuitable."

When all other difficulties seem to have been successfully overcome, that grand old standby, censorship of the language, is brought out to damn the tentative choice. It should be repeated that it is not always the clergy themselves who are responsible for this carping censorship, but rather the vague spectre that enforces upon all concerned a consideration of "what is expected of the Church." Occasionally a strong-minded cleric of genuinely progressive views succeeds in fighting clear of the tyranny and encouraging sound work and good theatre, but the odds are heavily in favour of such a man's leaving the obscurity of village work for some large town parish, *en route* for his bishopric. The Church Society then ceases to tread the dangerous road of experiment and returns to the safe and harmless narrow path of little sketches (royalty free) suitable for Parish Teas, eked out, if the parish is blessed with an enterprising choirmaster, by charming little operettas, or even a modestly staged Gilbert and Sullivan. Not that such activities should be despised. They serve a genuine purpose in amusing audience and actors alike—particularly the latter.

How much extra freedom is to be hoped for by an independent group of players who acknowledge no control save that of their own Committee? They are certainly free from the bugbear of having to show a sufficiently large clear profit on their show to enable substantial contributions to be made to the Organ Fund or the supply of carpets in the pews, and this will mean that they can choose more expensive plays and not begrudge money on staging them effectively. But, incidentally, they will also now have to pay for their rehearsal room. Freedom is always a costly thing, in its upkeep as well as in its initial purchase!

But the fact that the group is independent of Church control is too often an indication of the fact that it has come into existence without the Church's approval, and a direct or indirect antagonism grows up between the two bodies. If the group does serious or religious plays it is accused of encroaching upon the preserves of the Church—the jealousy and suspicion of the professional for the amateur, in a new direction. A farmer who had lately taken part in a Nativity play of some literary merit told me that an ordinary sermon sounded dull “after all that poetry.” If, on the other hand, the players confine themselves to the flippant, such choice is used as proof of the non-religious attitude of those who busy themselves with play-acting. It is usually the less intelligent of the clergy who maintain this suspicious attitude, but the tendency in a village is to credit the representative of the Church, merely by virtue of his position, with a superiority in the intellectual as well as in the moral world. Yet I have

CENSORSHIP

heard of a group of players who, after a performance of *Arms and the Man*, were told by a Church dignitary that "it was a pity they hadn't used their ability to higher moral purpose. For instance, what good work might not have been done by a play that attacked war."

On the whole, it is far easier for a group, unless it is lucky enough to have the whole-hearted and intelligent co-operation of the Church, to take up a position of placid indifference and continue in its own sweet way as if unaware of possible opposition. If it gives good shows the village, too, will be prepared to ignore the clerical cold shoulder. If this attitude fails, let it cheerfully carry on, if necessary, in militant independence, caring nothing for adverse criticism and strictures, and arming itself by conscientious work, even against the barbs of embittered sermons. After all, the open expression of two conflicting points of view is going to give the village something to think about—at any rate, something to talk about. But let these intrepid players be not too confident of triumph. The Church has a long, long start of them in the loyalty of the village audience, and the hold of Puritanism upon our villages is a strong one.

3

The second member of this triumvirate of censorship is the gentry, or the moneyed class of the district (the distinction is important, for the former usually show a nicer understanding of the ordinary villager), who maintain a strict guard over the morals and the freedom of thought of their less fortunate brethren. Let not exceptions, of which, mercifully, there are many, be quoted

against me ; they notoriously prove the rule. These people are particularly anxious that their protégés should avoid the "vulgar," which to them usually means anything that is full-bloodedly true to village life. They are terribly sensitive on the question of language. Though their culture allows them to recognize the oaths of a Shakespearian or eighteenth-century play as "typical of the period" and permissible as part of the atmosphere, they are oddly blind to the fact that precisely the same argument holds good of, say, a scene in a modern village pub or the farmyard. I am awakened every morning by an apostrophizing of the cows as they leave the milking sheds, which if reproduced or even hinted at on the stage would drive such amateur censors in solemn protest from their reserved seats in the village schoolroom.

Similarly, whilst considering it essential to their claim to culture to pay large sums of money for seats and suitable clothing in which to appreciate the fate of a Faust-betrayed Marguerite or the tragic results of infidelity in *Cavalleria Rusticana* (what would they think of its local production under the title "Village Philandering" ?), they will rise up in righteous indignation at a play that dares to hint that unmarried, or hastily married, mothers are to be found in ordinary village life. "If such women do exist," said Madame Petkoff, rising with dignity, "we should be spared the knowledge of them." And yet the old lady knew that the men were talking of her own daughter.

By such people, too, the experimental play—which sometimes has some slight inclination to the Left, or is suspected of some such deviation since it isn't the type of play they're used to—is definitely taboo. It is unwise that the villager should be encouraged to think—he might

CENSORSHIP

“get above himself.” The mischief of it is that these dictators have too often very effective means of enforcing this censorship. Only recently plays produced by a village group met with the disapproval of the local influentials, who were the trustees of the hall. These plays were modern, of no political bias, but admittedly “unusual.” A demand was made that, in future, all proposed plays should be submitted for approval before being put into production. Now since this censoring body happens to be composed of the employers of the majority of the players, they have little choice but to comply. The alternative and obvious argument that people who dislike a play need not go to see it does not seem to have occurred to these guardians of other people’s morals.

4

But the ultimate censor of a group’s choice and method of presentation of a play is bound to be village public opinion. And the small, compact rural community has a strength which the townsman may find it hard to appreciate. Against this the acting group has no weapon, nor, to be consistent, should it seek one if the perfect village acting group is held to be the mouthpiece of the community. It is here that we sometimes encounter the results of the danger that we have already discussed—the acting group that has been educated beyond the rank and file of the village. To the actors themselves, who may have begun to realize the primary importance of good theatre, a play may seem most suitable and free from all offence, and then they may discover that because of some small detail the play is subject to strong local

RUDE MECHANICALS

disapproval. Since the players can't exist without an audience, it is stupid in such cases to set grim jaws and go forward without giving some consideration to the grounds of this disapproval, and taking steps to meet it in choosing the next play.

We have already entered into fairly detailed discussion of the audience's attitude to various types of plays, but it might be à propos here to insert, without comment (though there has been and no doubt will be plenty) a "hint to playwrights" which is incorporated in the recent announcement of a "Village" Play Competition. The organizers "advise playwrights to avoid placing the main interest of their plays in such hackneyed or unsuitable subjects as the adventures of lottery tickets, stupid clergymen, cocktail parties, poor little rich girls, the ugly duckling of the family, the Lady Bountiful, excessively hen-pecked husbands, mothers-in-law, illegitimate children, village idiots, escaped convicts on Dartmoor, the invention of anti-war methods, and super-gas. They will also be well advised not to indulge in 'smart' talk, political or religious propaganda, sex psychology, or bad language."

To avoid post-production censorship and future boycotting, it is essential that the acting group should be able to gauge public opinion well beforehand and that plays be read and discussed by responsible people who know what will and what will not be acceptable by the rank and file. These people should know the local gossip, so that no special character or incident will be taken as libel or personal attack. Attached to the acting group should be some representatives (probably not consciously so) of the prospective audience, men or women who are not likely to lose sight of the audience

CENSORSHIP

view-point in a fog of dramatic enthusiasm for the play. The old adage that one must walk before trying to run is specially apt when applied to the theatre education of an audience. However heartily some of the more progressive lovers of drama may regret it, the fact remains that the job of training an audience is no less severe than that of training the actors. After all, the actors do ask to be trained; the audience is blissfully unaware of any such need in themselves.

In many ways one can, and ought to, ignore criticisms. After the first show or two one ceases to hear comments like, "It would have been better if there'd been a bit of singing." In the main, the village knows what it *doesn't* want, even if it isn't sure what it does want. By discreet avoidance of what isn't wanted there is a possibility of training a realization of what is—by providing it. Audience-education does not consist of forcing down reluctant throats plays with themes, incidents, or characterization to which they are alien or morally opposed.

5

One of the reasons for what seem to be stupid objections to some particular play is that, failing to grasp its central theme or interest, the audience have been forced to give undue prominence to incidents or scraps of dialogue which they did understand, and which, isolated in a sea of more or less incomprehensible matter, roused their disapproval. A little guidance and help in the direction of showing them what the play is really about will do much to counter these petty exceptions to detail.

This is what occurs in a play like *The Showing Up of*

RUDE MECHANICALS

Blanco Posnet. A production of this play to a normal village audience would rouse storms of protest because the real argument of the play is obscured to all but the more intellectual by the aggressive presence of characters like Feemy; the superficially blasphemous language; the frank talk of Feemy's profession. Blanco's final sermon, the explanation of the play and its sound moral lesson, falls on senses that have been bludgeoned into a state of non-reception. I don't believe that any amount of pre-curtain explanation would help this play in a village. But there are plays upon which an audience, if given a lead, can bring to bear a by no means negligible intelligence, and they can be helped to see the entire production in its right proportions.

This help and explanation need not savour of the schoolmaster; cinema and radio technique can help the producer here. The cinema-goer will call to mind the preliminary printed scroll that unwinds itself before the beginning of the action of a film in an unfamiliar setting; the close-ups of the characters, with or without suitable comment (for example, the picture-gallery sequence of the Montagues and Capulets that precedes the film version of *Romeo and Juliet*). The average town cinema audience is not noted for its intelligence, and Hollywood considers it well worth while to smooth the path of difficulty; at the same time it cannot afford to ruin the entertainment value of the film. The village audience, no less than the town, has no desire to be lectured at when it is out for an evening's entertainment, but it is willing to be helped to greater enjoyment.

In the Appendix will be found an illustration of one method of giving this help, again in connection with the play, *Granite*, from which we have frequently taken our

illustrations. The technique is that of the radio (which also has to cater for its weakest listener). House lights were lowered and footlights brought up, and in the customary lull the Announcer's voice was heard from behind the curtains (a group that can boast a microphone and amplifier will be at a big advantage here). The other players spoke their lines as indicated.

This method has a second merit, as well as that of explaining and fixing the atmosphere and period of the play. Because certain lines of the dialogue are brought into prominence before the play starts, these lines become *ready pointed*. When they are repeated in the course of the play they stand out from the rest of the dialogue as vaguely familiar, and so help to give shape to the play. This also helps the actors who may not have the technique at their command to point the key lines effectively enough for a not-so-quick audience. Such an underlining of the theme and the parts of the play that *do* matter, dramatically, will save the audience much waste of time and attention on the wrong things and rescue them from a tendency to comment on the trivial.

A propos of this problem of public disapproval, there is food for thought in the fact that a community of people who cavil at the portrayal of amorous peccadilloes and very human frailty on the stage, accept the crime of murder with appreciation and gusto ! But when Synge pointed out something very similar, the Irish audience wrecked the play—so perhaps we had better be quiet about it.

Let the players then not offend—even with good will—nor, as from intellectual heights, instruct their critics, who hold the whip, or rather the ticket, hand. But in scaling the tricky heights of theatre, let them cut safe

RUDE MECHANICALS

footholds for their audience and see that they are securely roped to their guides. And so they will soon be able to depend upon a strong body of show-supporters ready to back them up should they suddenly fall foul of the Church or the higher social hierarchy.

CHAPTER XII

FINANCE

“The lover shall not sigh gratis.”

I

“O SWEET Bully Bottom ! an the Duke had not given him sixpence a day for playing Pyramus, I'll be hanged ! ” And did not Fawson, of Coventry, receive threepence for crowing like a cock (a very special cock, of course), and another a “star's” fee of three and fourpence for playing God ? Hull showed a questionable appreciation either of the actor or of the Deity by giving the player of God only tenpence ; Noah was valued at one shilling. These fees were a mere honorarium or perhaps to compensate for the loss of a day's pay, for the actors were amateurs in spite of payment. In the Mumming Plays the inevitable collection was made in Beelzebub's frying pan. The cash soon underwent the customary metamorphosis into ale, doubtless with the same good gentleman's co-operation.

Nowadays the amateur player receives no reward save the applause of his fellow-men and the fun of the game, and, in less enlightened circles, bouquets, chocolates or cigars. But shows still cost money, and there are no kindly gilds prepared to foot the bill. The players who

call the tune must manage from somewhere to find the means of paying the piper. And the responsibility is all the greater when the shows are sponsored by some Church or charitable organization for which they are expected to raise funds.

The problem of the amateur society's finances is a vexed one, and has become complicated by the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century custom of reducing "theatre" to the status of bazaars, whist drives, and garden fêtes as a means of raising money "when all honest means have failed." This tradition has done infinite harm to amateur work. In the first place it kept the standard of playing down at a pitiful level—actors were playing from a mixture of fun and charitable condescension and the audience suffering in the cause of philanthropy, and they were not expecting value for their money.

In the second place when amateurs really began to take their work seriously—wished to act intelligent plays which demanded a royalty and needed presentation on a stage with adequate lighting, front curtains that could be relied on to work, and inner curtains all of one colour (not eked out with red-white-and-blue bunting and an occasional Union Jack)—they found themselves accused of wild extravagance and under the deepest suspicion because they "kept the money for themselves," *i.e.* failed to hand over fabulous sums to charity.

This attitude has been fought, and fought successfully, by most town societies, but in country districts prejudice dies hard, and the sale of tickets for a show of which the proceeds are "not going to anything" is still difficult. But if village theatre is ever to have any dignity of its own, ever to become, what it should be, an experience and a delight for actors and audience together, inde-

pendent of *arrière-pensées* of Church Roof or Nursing Association, the fight must go on.

This need not mean that the village players are never to give their services in a good cause, but let them hire themselves out, as professional players would, if an organization wishes for their help. They will be cheaper than professionals, because there will be no question of individual salaries, and will only need to have their joint expenses covered—royalties, transport, any extra costumes and properties. But the players will maintain their integrity as serious workers and not mere charity touts. This system has been tried in many districts and found to be a most satisfactory solution of the problem. The village players have put on a show for one or two nights at their own expense and risk ; proceeds, with luck and careful organization, have covered expenses, and perhaps left a few pounds to keep the society running until the next show. Their entertainment has, let us hope, proved a popular one. Perhaps they gave three or four one-act plays. The local Church, or that of a neighbouring village, feels that one of these plays would be suitable as an added attraction at a garden fête or parochial tea. The players have still their costumes, properties, and other necessities on hand ; their only probable expenses are royalty and transport. The repetition of the play is good fun and excellent practice for them, and the cause of charity now gets a far better show at very reasonable expense. In addition, the players get a little extra publicity which may help them later in the sale of their own tickets. But—and the but is important—they are still an independent body of people engaged on the specific job of giving good theatre.

It is also possible, and very tactful, for such a group,

RUDE MECHANICALS

should it unexpectedly (and how unexpectedly!) find itself in possession of surplus funds, to offer a voluntary subscription to any urgent local charity. "Ten shillings from the Bedderby Players" looks well on the subscription list for the Schoolchildren's Christmas Party.

A policy of this sort means that tickets bought for the players' own shows will be tickets bought by people who *want to see a play*, not by philanthropic old ladies "who won't be able to come because they never go out at night, but they'd like to help the Primrose League." Here, a word of warning. The Business Manager of a players' group should give strict instructions that tickets are not to be sold to people who make open profession of the fact that they don't intend to come and see the play. It's an insult! Would they ever dream of going to the box-office of the professional theatre and buying a couple of stalls which they never intend to occupy just because they're sorry for the actors?

There's another side to this question. If the players are selling tickets for a show on the understanding that proceeds are not for charity, but because they feel that their work is worth seeing on its own merit, they are under strict obligation to make sure that their work is worth the one-and-six, or whatever it is, that the people have paid. The amateur must not take money under false pretences. If he is selling "theatre," and not merely collecting for charity, he must sell theatre. The business side must be conscientiously organized so that as much profit as possible is made, consistent with a good show. The profit will then be employed in improving the permanent fixtures and apparatus at the group's disposal and, where possible, adding to the comfort of the audience. All this will ensure a gradual raising of the standard in the work

FINANCE

of the group, and in what the audience is expecting from them.

Bernard Shaw has the honour of having struck one of the shrewdest of blows for amateur theatre when he evolved his principle on the question of amateur payment of royalties for his plays. A group of players who write to him pleading that they only want to act his play because their branch of the Dumb Friends' Protection League is short of funds will receive the reply that his fee for amateurs is five guineas. It is no compliment to a dramatist to suggest that his only use to you is as a means of cajoling your neighbours into subscribing to a charity. On the other hand a group of people who "meet together to rehearse a play" decide that Shaw is a good dramatist, well worth acting, and their performance will be well worth other folks' time and money to witness. If such people write to him for permission they will receive the same respect that he pays to the professional player, *i.e.* permission to perform the play on a percentage assessment of the royalty.

Now, gratifying as this concession is for the amateurs from a financial standpoint (a performance of a first-class play like *Arms and the Man* may only cost them eight or nine shillings), their real debt to Shaw cannot be reckoned in pounds, shillings, and pence. They owe to our leading man of theatre, recognition of their right to be regarded as serious workers in that field. It is their duty to continue increasingly to deserve this recognition.

2

"If Bernard Shaw can do it, why can't other dramatists?" Well, let's not go into that just now, shall we?

RUDE MECHANICALS

After all, Shaw admits to being far richer than is comfortable for his Socialist conscience. But it is worth while bringing up a few points for discussion with regard to royalties. The village group is up against a very real problem here. We all know that good plays are usually expensive, and the holders of the rights over these plays may seem at first glance to be stony-hearted monsters battenning upon the struggling poor but honest village societies (those which are poor but not honest have their own dubious methods of "getting away with it").

There is one important fact too often forgotten by the village players, namely, that it is of comparatively little importance to the owners of first-class popular plays whether some struggling village group performs these plays or not. The salesman of first-class goods is not prepared to reduce his prices simply because the wife of Tom, Dick, or Harry protests that they are beyond her slender means. He will direct her to the cheap store in the next street and continue to bask in the custom of the wife of Percival, Cuthbert, or Clarence. Whether you think it is right that things should be so or not is beside the point. As society is organized at present, "theatre" is a saleable commodity and, like everything else, subject to the rules of good business. The joke of the situation is that it is usually the sternest upholders of society based on good business who are the loudest in their outcry against the ways of writers and their agents. I can recall an argument (very heated on one side) with an organizer of charitable performances who thought it dreadful that royalties should have to be paid for a one-act play at a bazaar. I suggested that some one had paid the makers for the crate of cutlery that was being raffled in the same good

FINANCE

cause. The craftsman was worthy of his hire, whether he chose to work in silver or in the English tongue framing it into theatre :

'Twas throwing words away, for still
The dear old maid would have her will
And answered—" It's scandalous ! "

In addition to the fact that the agent does not particularly care whether he sells the play or not to the needy villager, one has also to consider whether the playwright particularly wants his work to be mauled by the inexpert. That may sound cruel—but it is a forgivable attitude for the playwright who has had no opportunity to discover the excellent talent that lies hidden away in our villages. Too often it is assumed that the amateur actors are conferring some high favour upon a playwright by condescending to use his property, and that he should, therefore, be prepared to make sacrifices so that they may use it. Again we return to business principles. If the wife of Cuthbert (or Percival or Clarence) buys a fur coat at the salesman's price, and then chooses to wear it when painting the garage, why, that's no concern of the man who sold it, though should he see her at work it would pain him in the extreme, for he has, no doubt, taken a pride in the excellence of the coat. But for the wife of Tom (or Dick or Harry) to expect that the coat will be sold to her at half-price because she intends to paint the garage in it . . . Of course, there *is* another side to this argument too.

The final fact remains that honest people pay for what they use, and don't buy something they can't afford. The first call upon a society's funds should be the payment of royalties. The following is a summing up of the

RUDE MECHANICALS

judgment given in March 1936 in the Court of Appeal* :
“ The sum total of the decision is that every performance is a ‘ public ’ performance unless it is of a ‘ domestic ’ character in the strict and easily understood meaning of that term. Payment or non-payment for admission has nothing to do with it, neither has the nature or number of the audience. So long as the play is copyright, the author and/or his agent have the right to decide whether it may or may not be performed. If there is a fee for the performance of the play, it must be paid.”

The arguments in favour of revolutionary changes of the royalty system are so well known as not to need repetition. The villages are worse hit by the present system than many town societies, because the restricted number of available seats at any one performance often makes it definitely out of the question to hope to cover expenses. Persistence, however, is a fine thing, and what is said ten times to-day may be listened to to-morrow.

That the village society is at present penalized there is no doubt, but nothing is to be gained by carping piecemeal and pleading particular cases. Such individual representations will be ignored. The obvious method is one of joint appeal and explanation. Let the poor and needy unite in asserting their rights to equal consideration with the rich. Their cause is a just one, though many who clamour for a reform in the rights of property in the world of the theatre would be shocked if they realized the principles for which they are fighting. It may cheer these people to know that a play like *Waiting for Lefty*,

* Editorial, *Amateur Theatre and Playwrights' Journal*, March 27, 1936.

FINANCE

a sensation in New York, is positively given away when compared with the price charged for, say, *Autumn Crocus*. It's a mad world, my masters, and it's the poor what helps the poor !

Note.—For a full and interesting statement of both sides of the argument *re* royalties see *The Amateur Theatre and Playwrights' Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 88, Jan. 28, 1938.

CHAPTER XIII

DRAMA FESTIVALS

“For the short and the long is, our play is preferred.”

I

THERE is little doubt that Thespis was to blame for this too. His youthful ardour for acting was not damped by Solon's rebuke and criticism (thereby proving that he was of the right stuff for festivals), nor did the accusations of deceit and trickery succeed in strangling the infant Greek drama in its cradle. Pisistratus, who, so rumour has it, had learned from Thespis how to employ an actor's tricks in swaying a crowd for political ends, became, appropriately enough, the first patron of dramatic art, and it was during his last tyranny that the first competitive dramatic festival was held in Athens, 535 B.C. Thespis, now an old man, led his team to victory and bore off the Athenian equivalent for the Lord Howard de Walden Trophy.

No doubt the other competing teams had some bitter things to say about the jury of five adjudicators. A difficult lot to please, these judges. In 494 Phrynichus was fined for reducing his audience to tears (O noble judge !); in 415 Euripides lost first place to an obscure poet because the moral of the *Trojan Women* was an uncomfortable one for the politicians of Athens. And

DRAMA FESTIVALS

surely some one blundered when Sophocles' *Œdipus Tyrannus* limped home behind the work of a writer whom no one to-day, outside the circle of classical scholars, has ever heard of. But the Athenian judges, like those of our own day, though not infallible, were, or so they thought, final. Let disconsolate festival playwrights take courage from the thought that posterity has reversed many of these ancient judges' decisions.

The competitive element—at any rate, its official recognition—was absent from the mediæval performances. "The true festival spirit" was the actor's incentive to a good performance, but no doubt there was excited comparison of the various pageants by the self-appointed judges at the street corners, and no doubt they had means of making their decisions known—though the religious nature of the performance would help to give the actors protection from the convenient garbage that lay scattered in the mediæval street. Did not Herod dare to rage furiously, not only on the pageant, but in the street also?

The idea of drama festivals has of recent years been revived by the British Drama League and the Village Drama Society as the most effective means of "raising the standard of production among amateurs . . . and promoting a higher standard of appreciation among audiences . . . and of encouraging the progressive element." (I must pause to thank the compilers of this little list of aims and objects for giving me heads for the arguments in this chapter.)

2

Much has been written and many bitter words have been flung from platforms and across conference floors

RUDE MECHANICALS

and tables on the question of drama festivals and their organization. Luckily, many of the controversial points have little to do with village players, though these yield place to none in festival keenness.

In one connection most of the villages have modified the general system, namely, in checking the competitive element in the festivals. This is probably largely due to the Women's Institutes. Whether women are peculiarly sensitive to defeat by their rivals (some one once said something about a "woman scorned," and when there are two or three teams of them . . . was Orpheus perhaps an adjudicator before the Bacchæ pursued him?) or whether they become too swollen-headed by success (perhaps, after all, their husbands had something to do with changing the system), all this is open to the argument of psychology experts. The fact remains that in many rural districts the annual festival is non-competitive, the adjudicator awarding graded certificates of merit for the players' performances. Sometimes it is arranged that a society be recommended for "promotion" to a preliminary round of the National Festival of the British Drama League, in which town teams are engaged. Exception could be taken to this as implying that the work of the village players is inferior to that of their town comrades—a fact that is manifestly untrue when the best village teams are compared with the rank and file of the towns, though there is no doubt that even the best village teams come poorly off amongst a picked group of town amateurs.

There is a great deal to be said in favour of keeping the two types of amateurs apart in any competitive work. A village group ought to be working in a very different medium from that of a town if both are doing their job

DRAMA FESTIVALS

of playing real community theatre. In a town competitive festival a play presented by a good village team can often meet with startling success because, if nine or ten other plays have been seen the same week, its theme, atmosphere, and method of presentation are so utterly different from all the others that audience and adjudicator alike are surprised into welcoming its originality as superiority over the others. On the other hand it is quite likely that a town audience (to say nothing of a London adjudicator) may entirely fail to see the point of the play or the truth to life of the actors' characterization. But let not village teams indulge in indiscriminate snorts at the expense of "London adjudicators." Some of them are countrymen born and bred—London merely their workshop.

There are obvious practical difficulties, too, in the way of "getting over" on a town stage a play designed for production in a village. And the holding of preliminary rounds in the villages does not obviate this, since, by the present system of promotion from district to area and then on to London finals, sooner or later the village team will encounter a town stage and a town audience. Besides, what's the object of it all? What profit is it really to village players to walk the boards of the Old Vic? And so, since the need of competition in terms of first, second, or third place is, presumably, to enable the organizers to select three or four best teams for a London final, it seems unnecessary to adopt such a system for groups which have neither the chance nor the intention of finding themselves there.

The competitive spirit, *i.e.* the desire to be as good as or better than one's neighbour, is equally well served by the encouragement to work for a certificate of the highest

possible grade. If the Little Muddlewick Women's Institute got a Grade A Certificate last year, the Barn Players of Greater Swancombe will see to it that they raise their own standard from B to a sure-fire A. In the next festival the adjudicator, aware of an all-round improvement in standard, will adjust his own, and if the women of Little Muddlewick have been resting on their laurels they may find themselves down in the B Class, whilst Greater Swancombe carries off its coveted A certificate. No. The sporting competitive spirit that has made Britain what it is, is not so easily quenched.

By removing the necessity of nice adjustment of marking to find an arbitrary first place, we rid ourselves of another source of endless controversy: the relative merits of tragedy, comedy, melodrama, etc. In the large independent festivals held in many of our towns and cities, particularly in the holiday resorts, where anything up to twenty-five or thirty groups may be competing, it is possible to classify the plays, and the adjudicator is not under the necessity of having to decide between two excellent performances, one a tragedy, the other a comedy. I have known a B.D.L. festival where a tragedy has beaten a comedy by *three* marks! The adjudicator has openly admitted it was because tragedy seemed to her the higher medium. Two absurdities show themselves here. Those *three* marks . . . any school examiner will tell you what lies behind an odd two or three marks, on or off a borderline case, to turn the scale according to general impression of the candidate's work. But the second absurdity is a greater one. It has been neatly summed up by one adjudicator in the question: Which would you rather have—a carrot or a policeman? Obviously, if you're hungry, a carrot; if

DRAMA FESTIVALS

your watch has been stolen, a policeman. The village non-competitive system gets rid of this. Comedy, drama, farce, can all win A Certificates, each on its own merit. So let not village teams sigh after B.D. Laurels. They have chosen the better part.

And now, having cleared the ground a little, we can get down to the professed objects of these festivals and try to decide to what extent they are attained.

Object Number One : To raise the standard of production among amateur societies. In an earlier chapter we spoke of the difficulty of convincing the amateur player, village or otherwise, of how bad he is. The customary procedure after a show was for the friends of each actor to overwhelm him with praise of his performance and scorn of that of his colleagues. They would agree with him that only the hypercritical would notice that his wig slipped over one eye during his grand soliloquy ; that it was obviously the stage-manager's fault that he tripped over the carpet and spoilt a magnificent exit. . . . The arrival of the dispassionate adjudicator has changed all that. At last the actor is made to see himself as others see him. If he has not rehearsed sufficiently in costume to know that he can't tear his hair with a wig on, the producer is taken to task for bad rehearsal management. If his lines are inaudible, the impartial-minded stranger flatly tells him so—he isn't hoping to be engaged to the man's sister next week. If a hitherto despised player has made the most of a small part, he also is told so, and the wish expressed to see him given more opportunity, in spite of the black looks of the

RUDE MECHANICALS

producer-lead, who knows the fellow can act—but hang it, he's not their set ! Many are the readjustments of opinion, many the hearts that are aching after the adjudicator has said his say.

There is no doubt that the help and criticism of these outside judges has done enormous good. Standards have improved. Even those most rootedly convinced of their own merits, and, in public, loudly indignant at belittling remarks, take thought in secret and determine not to be made to look foolish again. And the serious actor is genuinely grateful for the help.

The influence of these festivals upon village producers is far-reaching. The unoriginal exhibitionist tyrant, who holds his (often her) position by virtue of anything but genuine regard for theatre, either learns through bitter experience or indignantly refuses ever again to be subjected to such humiliation before the whole village, and promptly resigns (hurrah!). The conscientious producer, with the beginnings of sound ideas but perhaps a little timid of trying them, works with a will before the show, delighted that at last his work will be seen by some one who will recognize his hidden hand in the work of the players and be ready to give hints on how the staging and general production could be improved. It is an opportunity for trying out new ideas (audience and stage provided), without jeopardizing the slender finances of his group—and professional criticism is thrown in gratis.

Such a producer will probably reap his reward in another direction. I once heard a village player shamefacedly remark when the group was coming away from its first experience of a festival and an adjudication, "But you know, we were told that at nearly every rehearsal."

DRAMA FESTIVALS

And now that their producer's comments were endorsed by Mr. X, the well-known playwright, they were prepared to listen and obey at future rehearsals with added respect and attention. The keen actor and producer has little to fear ; the pig-headed will probably throw up the job. In either case the possibilities of sound theatre are immeasurably increased.

4

One might conclude from all this that every adjudicator is the Oracle of Theatre itself and should be listened to with the rapt awe that such infallibility commands. Would it were so, but adjudicators have their frailties no less renowned than those of actors and producers. As far as village drama is concerned the adjudicator's task is a very difficult one. He must be in possession of a knowledge of plays, acting, production and general technique that is beyond the scope of the village players—how else is he to help them raise the standard of their work ? At the same time he must be fully aware of the circumstances, both the restrictions and the possibilities, in which their activities are carried out, and succeed in combining these two characteristics in such a way that he gains the confidence of the groups by his understanding of them and yet can impress them (and not depress) by his unquestionably wider experience of the theatre. And the sum total of his advice should not be aimed at improving their work solely for festival purposes (where conditions are in many ways unnatural), but should be primarily guidance for work in their own village. This is sometimes forgotten by both players and adjudicator.

He will probably find a very mixed bag of standards

RUDE MECHANICALS

on which to adjudicate. One group will be ready for help and advice on details of acting and production that will be barely comprehensible to another. It is so easy for a keen adjudicator, who sees many, many things that are wrong, to overwhelm his luckless victims with well-intentioned advice and comment on such a variety of topics that none of them really sinks in. He departs glowing with a sense of having flung away bushels of pearls, when one or two carefully chosen and distributed jewels of advice would have had far greater value for the group. If he concentrates on one or two things he'll probably be accused of having some special breed of bee in his bonnet—but what matter? Other adjudicators will follow him with bees of a different swarm—if the organizers are choosing wisely. Even the most intelligent group can't learn everything at one festival. One year the main comments will be on details of movement and gesture, another year on costumes and props, another time settings will take primary place.

With regard to this last, let an adjudicator make careful inquiry not only as to the possibilities of the stage, but as to *responsibility* for the stage. I have known an adjudicator waste valuable time and alienate a cast by adverse comment on the setting of a door (admittedly the wrong way) when the stage manager of the playing team has been almost on his knees in an appeal for just that placing, only to be told by the "super S.M." that it was impossible—they had no door swung the way he wanted.

Object Number Two: To promote a high standard of appreciation among audiences. We have stressed

DRAMA FESTIVALS

the point almost to boredom that any estimate of community drama must take the audience seriously into account. How is the audience catered for in the drama festival ?

To begin with, of whom does the audience at a festival consist ? Since even a festival for villages must take place at some moderately large acknowledged centre, easily accessible for all neighbouring teams, there are sure to be present more than a sprinkling of the local population, bent on an enjoyable afternoon or evening—or both. It is possible that these people will have no special interest in any one team, save what may have been aroused by outstanding success or failure in some previous year. Such folk will form a useful nucleus of unprejudiced opinion. Then there will be the supporters of the rival teams ; for where the community spirit is strong, and the festival spirit even stronger, the keenness of non-acting members finds its equal only in the enthusiasm of football team fans.

And this, within reason, is all to the good. The players themselves should nurse this enthusiasm and take with them to the festival as many of their customary audience as possible ; and this for reasons far more worthy than that of ensuring a full bus-load and therefore decreasing the cost of transport of all concerned. The more intelligent interest they can whip up in the play they are doing the better.

It is an idea to give, if possible, a pre-festival view of their entry. I have seen this method tried with interesting results. Invitations were issued to friends of the actors and loyal supporters of the local shows. The proposed play was given, and short written comments asked for. The immediate results looked rather like a

RUDE MECHANICALS

Christmas game of consequences. But the comments did come in—some of them very shrewd ones. Most of them were read aloud. The play went forward to the festival with everybody feeling that it was really something from the village as a whole, and not just a private excursion of the players. Because the team's "supporters" had already exercised their own wits and ingenuity in devising comments on the play, they were all the more interested to hear what the adjudicator would have to say about it.

It may be suggested that this "team-supporting" audience is a very difficult one to play to, that they are slow to see merit in a rival team; and those members of the audience who are themselves playing in groups are likely to be even more prejudiced. But time and experience soon makes of these a keenly critical, not an adverse audience, and the absence in village festivals of the cut-throat type of competition helps to maintain an audience's generosity. Besides, let not a few glaring exceptions upset the rule. To my knowledge, at any rate, the police have not yet had to be called in to restore order at a festival—though I believe some adjudicators have had moments of fearsome doubt.

Where does the raising of the standard of appreciation come in? First, of course, by the mere fact that festivals increase the number and types of plays that the keen show-going members of the community see. From this alone a greater understanding of theatre is bound to come. But undoubtedly the most popular item of a festival is the keenly awaited "Adjudicator's Remarks." The adjudicator is not only the mouthpiece of the particular audience of that afternoon or evening, but he is also on exhibition as an example of the Perfect Show-seer. His

DRAMA FESTIVALS

comments at the end of all the plays are not only a lesson to the players, but to the audience as well. Had they noticed their attention wandering in the middle of the second play? The adjudicator will tell them why the players failed to grip. Ought they to have laughed at the particular point at which they did? Apparently not; but they hear with some relief that their outburst was due, not to their own inherent nit-wittery, but because the actor made so hopelessly inappropriate a gesture. Heads nod in wise agreement when Mr. X praises an actor whom they, too, had singled out for whispered commendation. They soon discover that there is more in this business of listening to a play than they used to think. The next time they go to a show in their own village they go ready-armed with the rudiments of dramatic criticism.

But let players and audience beware, and let adjudicators who instruct the audience take heed. It is so easy to pick up a smattering of superficial critical jargon and lose sight of essentials. May a kind heaven protect us from the creation of "clever" audiences who are merely on the watch for "points." They can ruin a village show as hopelessly as the smart-Alec who annoys his neighbours and baits a conjurer into frenzy by futile whispered comments on how it's done. He can't do it himself, of course, but he's read all about it in a book he had for Christmas.

There is a very real danger of the festival-educated audience travelling along this road. Each one fancies himself as an amateur adjudicator, even when he is not at a festival performance. Unfortunately, he is more apt to imitate the bad ones, with slick play to the gallery and witty comments at the players' expense thrown in "to

RUDE MECHANICALS

set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh," than the really conscientious adjudicator who is anxious to give considered constructive criticism, salting his comments with sufficient kindly humour to save the audience from boredom. The old excuse, that a liberal sprinkling of cheap wit was necessary as the audience couldn't understand the technical advice that was being given to the players, no longer holds water. The audience nowadays knows as much about it as the players, and can be as full of technical gossip as a Yorkshire crowd returning from a football match.

Let every adjudicator remember that each member of the audience looks upon him as a model of listening technique. Let him realize that he has before him two or three hundred village Agates, guiltless of a Sunday review; that village audiences will, in time, and in quick time, too, be what he makes them. It is no light responsibility, Mr. (or Mrs. or Miss) Adjudicator!

6

Object Number Three: To encourage the progressive element. I have already talked much, and I hope provocatively, of the progressive element and its presence or absence in village community theatre. As it stands here, as something which it is the duty of festivals to encourage, it is naïvely oracular in its ambiguity. Adjudicators do differ so in their ideas of what is progressive and what is not, or what is merely "an unwise choice for the village player." Generally the word is taken by the players as meaning that the original play will be encouraged, for surely it is "progressive" to act a play

DRAMA FESTIVALS

written by one of its own members ? That, of course, is as may be. Progressive could equally well be interpreted as meaning a successful effort to reach forward to a play that has hitherto been thought beyond the village players' ability. And what about progress in the technique of acting ? or an original conception in the production of a well-known established play ?

No. "Progressive element" is vague—too vague. What it really means, as it stands, is "the encouragement at any particular festival of whatever any particular adjudicator may advocate as his own pet theory on village drama."

Let the village players make full and wise use of the festivals, for excellent use can be made of them. But when they find that their lower jaws are becoming a little grimly set and the light of battle is beginning to dawn in their eyes, and when they are beginning to hear over the footlights (if the progressive element hasn't abolished them) self-conscious whispers from the audience of "pointing," tempo, "fluffing," wrong foot . . . during a show that should be sweeping them off their mud-laden feet in uncritical amusement or terror, then, for the sake of all that is worth while in theatre, let them decide to give the festival a miss next year and let the retrogressive element have a chance.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT NOW ?

“ Happy in this—she is not yet so old but she may learn ”

I

AND now, as we leave the village schoolroom, where the players are already dismantling their fit-up stage—for the room must be ready for school on Monday morning, and Sunday is no day for such a job—let us try to explain to those perplexed Greek and mediæval ghosts, who are muttering that all this seems far removed from their own experience, something of what it all means. What *good* does it do, or has it done ? they ask. What has it in common with us ? With us whom you’ve blamed for starting it ?

One great thing it has in common with them, so much taken for granted in their day that they cannot realize how new and precious it is to us. This, at any rate, is the people’s own, if they will but keep it so. “ But hasn’t it always been ? ” they ask. We plunge into a history of the last four hundred years—the Reformation and the isolation of theatre in the professional playhouses, haunts of the rabble and the aristocracy ; the disappearance, save at Christmas junketings, of the play-acting of rude mechanicals. We paint a picture of the nineteenth

WHAT NOW ?

century and the first few decades of our own, when "amateur theatricals" were an idle pastime fitfully indulged in by the leisured few. . . . Now, at last, it is back again in hands that know, or can learn, how to respect it. It is once again with the people, who, because they are themselves at close grips with life, can, if they will, bring real life to the theatre they are creating.

The village players to-day are in much the same position as the mediæval craftsmen, who, rescuing the Bible story, both Old and New Testament, from the dim unreality of theology, grafted upon it the shape and texture of their own lives. Village drama is no longer the anæmic plaything of the drawing-room. It has come out into the fresh air of a new and invigorating life. It is back where it belongs.

And if the villager has done so much for theatre, what does he in turn stand to gain in this new and fascinating hobby he has found for himself? It is his natural road to that much-discussed thing called culture or education—hard and ugly words for a new and deeper zest in life, the beginning of the "deeper awareness of the marvel of our being alive at all." For theatre is the home of experience by proxy of all that a restricted life fails to give. It is an instinctive compensation to-day for an over-mechanized (even in agricultural districts) and, as specialized employment increases, an ever-narrowing, daily experience. The dramatic activities in the Institutes of derelict Welsh mining villages show how deep-rooted is the craving for such compensation. Not only is it a widening of experience by bringing within the player's compass the thought and life that otherwise would remain quite outside it. Theatre directs a patterning and an ordering of the life he already knows. It deepens his experience as

RUDE MECHANICALS

well as widening it. "Seeing that by the surpassing bounty of God we are endued with the faculty of thought and inquiry, whereby we not only observe what lies before us, but reflect upon things past and forecast things to come, it is our rightful claim to employ these powers in the examination of all facts and all truths, comparing and ordering them one with the other, and surveying the whole universe as it were our own domain ; *even though we may wander ignorantly therein and fail to view it with right apprehension.*" Here, indeed, the mediæval Vives gives us a summing up of what could be the aims of village theatre from which even the lawgivers of the Drama League may learn something. The italics are mine.

Much of this may sound like vague idealism ; a pious hope for the future of the movement. It is more than a hope ; it is an indication of the hard, practical road it must tread unless it is to slide back once more into the hands of dilettanti.

2

The harvest is ready, and the labourers are by no means few. There is, however, some little danger of their being sent to reap the wrong field. We have spent some time in discussing where the richest crops are most likely to be growing. The instinct and respect for religion, in the fullest sense of the word, is a common feature of village life in all parts of the country. The townsman sees around him nowadays little but the less noble works of man, and can, perhaps, be forgiven for assuming that man is, or some day may be, master of his own fate. Familiarity with the changing seasons, experience of the

WHAT NOW ?

caprices of the weather, which no mechanism can control, and which call halt to modern inventions (expensive milk vans stick in a few feet of snow and the farmer grimly returns to the use of horses for transport) are a constant reminder to the village community that man is not yet lord of the universe. Whatever the future may hold in store, here, in the rich ground of common experience and a common faith, seems the ripe place for the true seed of village drama.

In the meantime, the Village Drama Movement has already succeeded in giving pleasant, invigorating recreation to its devotees ; it has canalized activities that were already there, and spurred the most unexpected people into new ones. Women whose world's boundary was the four walls of their kitchen have discovered the joys of escape into a brave new world indeed, and men have found an alternative to the fireside of the home or the village inn. And once or twice a year the whole village (practically) has found a new excuse for gathering together to laugh at themselves or one another, or, for a couple of hours, to "face the map of their own fate."

3

And where, during the twenty years of its new lease of life, has village drama failed to realize the hopes of its pioneers ?

The main answer is to be found in the pathetic cry : "Where are our plays ?" Here the villager comes badly off in comparison with the townsman. It is the proud and justified boast of the British Drama League that through its festivals and the building up of an organized

RUDE MECHANICALS

amateur theatre it has created the one-act play. And these plays are no mere amateur scribbblings. As the amateur player has developed his technique and improved the conditions under which he plays, the demand for good theatre and plays of distinction has increased, and a large number of these one-acters will take their permanent place in the literature of the country as well as in the players' repertoire. But such plays are almost entirely of the town theatre and not of the village. There is danger of the present prevalent malnutrition spreading to village drama.

It is possible that this lack of sustenance is due to the too-sudden descent of expert executants upon the villages, bent upon teaching them technique and theory, and therefore superimposing a false excellence upon their work. It is reminiscent of a Keep Fit campaign and its strenuous drilling of under-nourished adolescents. No amount of self-conscious exercising will build a healthy race on empty bellies, muscles flabby for lack of honest work, and nerves jangled by day to day anxieties. And no amount of slick training in deportment, diction, and the rules of presentation can build folk-theatre in a community that has not yet found its tongue. And if the villages are allowed to be persuaded that a mechanically-contrived machine will do the trick for them as well as or even better than they can do it for themselves, they will never trouble to find their tongue. No doubt there are those who think it safer so. How often have we seen a look in a dog's eyes that has made us thankful that animals can't talk ?

We have hinted, too, of the danger of over-emphasis on festival work and its semi-deifying of the adjudicator (not his fault, poor man !). This encourages the same

WHAT NOW ?

slickness of criticism in the audience as that of performance taught to the players. This new and amusing game, this pinchbeck appreciation of superficial technique, distracts them from honest appraisal of what the play itself really means, and whether their life is going to be the merrier, happier, or richer for having seen it.

4

The house that was built on sand fell an easy victim to the first storm that came. We live to-day in a world whose sky is heavy with the threat of storms ; storms that have already burst horridly over countries in Europe, Africa, and the Far East. The village drama movement came into conscious being with the readjustments and new awareness that followed the last great upheaval. Has it the strength, is it deeply rooted enough to stand the strain of whatever the next ten years may bring ? Unless it really has meaning and has become part and parcel of the life of the village, it will fall into the background and disappear, dismissed as an idle frivolity and waste of time when greater issues are waiting. If it is the real thing it will gain an added strength from the increasingly urgent necessity of those whose mouthpiece it should be. How many groups will disappear, should a harassed government find itself forced to tighten the purse-strings of the grant for adult education and deprive the flock of its academic shepherd ? How many will drop back again into the hands of a nineteenth-century dilettantism ?

At present this child of the village is a moderately healthy and promising one—but she has been very care-

RUDE MECHANICALS

fully nurtured. There can be no doubt of the sincerity of the work, and the genuine interest that her nurses have shown. And now her infancy seems to be over, and the kindly foster-mother who tended her and understood her shares her education with the governess who has undertaken the young thing's education. In plain English, the first aims of the Village Drama Society are apt to be lost sight of in the throng of education authorities who are financially responsible for much of the work. Those who are in immediate contact with the village group, the lecturers and advisers, are enthusiastic and hard working. It is not suggested that they may be leading the villages astray out of some queer malice aforethought. But it is suggested that the present extensive and intensive educational campaign, coloured, as it is bound to be, by a cultural background very different from that of the villager, is not for the ultimate good of true community drama.

The Greek shepherds who flocked round that innovator Thespis ; Fawson of Coventry, clutching his prettily earned threepence ; his pal, who played God ; grimy-faced Beelzebub and his horde of mumming rascals, stare in perplexity, and then troop off back to whatever Hades is reserved for amateur players, where they interrupt their ponderings about it all to indulge their love of horse-play, and crack ribald jests at the grim and uplifting business drama has become for the modern villager.

And so "the best in this kind are but shadows ; and the worst no worse, *if imagination amend them.*"

APPENDIX

I

Pre-curtain introduction to *Granite*

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE. Off the north coast of Devon, near the mouth of the Bristol Channel, the rocky island of Lundy rises out of the sea ; a block of GRANITE, three miles long and a mile broad.

Even to-day it is an anxiety to sailors, though it has two lighthouses and a wireless station, but just over a hundred years ago it was the home of smugglers, pirates, and—worst trade of all—*wreckers*.

JORDAN'S VOICE. The good old trade. My mother was of Lundy stock. My mother's fathers were lords of Lundy and all the ships that passed eight hundred years ago.

PROSPER'S VOICE. False lights ? Is that it ?

JUDITH'S VOICE. Yes. That's it.

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE. In our story the master of the island is JORDAN MORRIS.

JUDITH'S VOICE. He's not a man. He's a block of Lundy granite.

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE. Ten years before the play opens, he had brought a wife to Lundy. She is a Londoner, used to the life and bustle of a city.

JUDITH'S VOICE. Did I know what was ahead of me ? I tell you, it's killing me, the sea, and the gulls screaming, and Jordan's silences, and Jordan's face, set, set, set on his work—like granite.

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE. Into their lives comes Jordan's brother Prosper, pensioned off from the navy. He has served with Nelson.

PROSPER'S VOICE. When I saw you, I thought, " she's borne a lot, she's been patient." I wanted to make it up to you. I thought it would be fine to have a home and make a woman happy.

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE. But between Judith and Prosper and their happiness there falls the sinister figure of the Stranger ; tossed into the house, out of the storm, like a piece of wreckage. He strikes

APPENDIX

his bargain with Judith. For food, warmth, and shelter he will be her servant.

MAN'S VOICE. *Your servant. I'll serve you. This I swear : if you have a wish, turn to me. If it's a message, I'll take it ; a desire, I'll fulfil it. If a woman angers you, it's your own quarrel. But if a man lays a finger on you, I'll kill him !*

JUDITH'S VOICE. *Who sent you ? Where did you come from ?*

[Fade up STORM EFFECTS for a few seconds, then fade under voices as CURTAIN goes up.]

2

I have gathered together here a list of plays, most of which are mentioned in the text, which offer interesting material for discussion. It should be noted that no suggestion is made that all these plays are suitable for village production. In fact, many have been chosen as examples of what is entirely unsuitable.

Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream ; Macbeth ; Othello ; Hamlet.*

Greek Plays, translations by Professor Gilbert Murray.

Mediæval Plays ; Everyman, etc. (see collection in Dent's Everyman Library).

Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist ; Every Man in his Humour.*

Sheridan, *The School for Scandal ; The Rivals.*

Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer.*

G. B. Shaw, *Arms and the Man ; The Showing Up of Blanco Posnet.*

J. M. Barrie, *Dear Brutus ; The Admirable Crichton.*

J. M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World ; Riders to the Sea.*

W. B. Yeats, *The Land of Heart's Desire.*

Clemence Dane, *Granite.*

Rodney Ackland, *Strange Orchestra ; The Old Ladies.*

Gregson, *Devil a Saint.*

John Masfield, *Tragedy of Nan.*

Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty.*

Irwin Shaw, *Bury the Dead.*

Sutton Vane, *Outward Bound.*

Frank Vosper, *Murder on the Second Floor.*

Laurence Housman, *Prunella ; Little Plays of St. Francis.*

Lennox Robinson, *The Far-off Hills ; The White-headed Boy.*

APPENDIX

- Eden Philpotts, *Yellow Sands ; The Farmer's Wife*.
Dodie Smith, *Touchwood*.
Noel Coward, *Cavalcade*.
L. du Garde Peach, *The Path of Glory*.
S. I. Hsiung, *Lady Precious Stream*.
J. B. Priestley, *Eden End ; Laburnum Grove*.
A. A. Milne, *Toad of Toad Hall*.
W. P. Lipscombe, *Clive of India*.
Marc Connelly, *Green Pastures*.
F. Sladen-Smith, *Assyrian Afternoon (One-Act)*.
Bernard Gilbert, *The Old Bull ; Eldorado (One-Act)*.

